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Author(s): Nancy Quam-Wickham
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“Cities Sacrificed on the Altar of Oil”
Popular Opposition to Oil Development in 1920s Los Angeles

Nancy Quam-Wickham

“A paradise of sunshine, fruit, and flowers,” the true-life embodiment of “Oz, the Garden of the West,” a land where “smokeless and cloudless skies have let the sunshine stream into human hearts” — such were typical characterizations of the Los Angeles basin in the early twentieth century. But this Eden-like landscape was also to become, in the decade of the 1920s, the site of what was then the most intensive oil field development in history, producing “the greatest outpouring of mineral wealth the world has ever known.” Southern California’s tremendous petroleum industry accounted for over 20 percent of the world’s output of crude oil during part of the 1920s. Petroleum exploitation, in fact, not only provided a basis for southern California’s economic growth during that decade, but was also such a dominant force that the history of southern California’s oil development, in the words of contemporary economist John Ise, is “almost the history of the oil industry of the entire country.”

As a central element in the economic transformation of southern California, the oil industry forever changed the region’s landscape. Located within the fastest-growing metropolitan area of the country, oil development radically changed existing land-use patterns, encouraged industrialization and suburbanization, and contributed to real estate speculation in the region. The particular nature of oil exploitation in the Los Angeles basin — the preponderance of small landholdings (“town-lots”), its intense and unplanned development, and the unusual geological formations encountered in drilling — contributed to production practices which devastated the physical environment and severely strained the economic vitality of the industry. So serious was oil pollution that one observer found the region to be a “stygian landscape” in 1924. This new context of oil development in an urban area presented industry managers with new problems: public concerns over unprecedented levels of oil pollution, a changed political setting offering greater regulatory opportunities to municipal and state governments, and the prospect of a revived union movement that explicitly based its rebirth on the social control of industry.
Pollution, overproduction, and profligate waste were the consequences of unchecked oil development in the Los Angeles basin, consequences that reached crisis proportions in the 1920s. The few previous studies of the politics of oil pollution control have generally ignored the local political context of oil's operations, focusing instead on the few relatively weak federal regulatory achievements of the 1920s. In California, local oil politics diverged significantly from federal policies. Especially in the urban environment of Los Angeles, the crisis of California's oil industry animated the efforts of policymakers to control the industry. Local initiatives were remarkably successful in slowing the pace of oil development. In particular, the efforts of residents of the mostly blue-collar communities of the southland to regulate and restrict oil development during this decade—and consequently to lessen the devastating effects of oil pollution on their immediate environment—signaled the emergence of working-class conservationism. This type of conservatism can be defined as the sustained efforts of working people to shape public policy to protect their communities from environmental destruction. Importantly, their actions convinced oil management that political control of industry was indeed imminent.

The crisis of oil was rooted in the political economy of its production; opponents to oil development most frequently advanced political alternatives, not technological or economic ones, to resolve that crisis. Good reasons existed for this emphasis on political solutions. Economic control of the industry seemed impossible, as the failure of the oil workers' strike of 1921 had recently demonstrated. Technological control of the industry was likewise removed from the realm of
public endeavor. In the late 1910s, engineers from the State Division of Oil and Gas had assumed responsibility for mandating technological improvements in oil development work. Direct legislation, rule adoption by referendum, and unilateral mandates issued by local policymakers seemed the only avenues for public regulation of dangerous and offensive oil industry practices.

Oil was not new to Californians in the 1920s. California had been an important oil-producing state since the 1890s; before the 1920s, however, oil production had been concentrated in the San Joaquin Valley, with some additional production along the coastal sections of Orange, Los Angeles, Ventura, Santa Barbara, and San Luis Obispo counties, as well as in some inland areas of Monterey and San Benito counties. Los Angeles had first experienced an oil boom in the early 1890s. The Los Angeles City Field developed at a frenzied pace, creating conditions that would be greatly magnified thirty years later: rapid development of the field, over-production without an accompanying increase in demand, a drastic drop in the price per barrel of crude oil, and waste. Yet production in the City Field declined rapidly, and although several new oil pools were located in Los Angeles and Orange counties in subsequent years, by 1913 the Los Angeles basin accounted for only 14 percent of the state’s oil production.3

The Los Angeles basin’s subordinate position changed drastically in the years following World War I. The discovery of one new field after another propelled the area into its position as the state’s leading oil-producing region: Montebello in 1917, Richfield in 1919, Newport Beach and Huntington Beach in 1920, Long Beach (Signal Hill) in 1921, Santa Fe Springs and Torrance in 1922, Dominguez in 1923, Inglewood in 1924, and Seal Beach in 1926. These new fields were not only extremely rich in their oil deposits, but the oil produced was more suitable for refining into gasoline than were the heavier, asphalt-based crude oils from the Valley. In the summer of 1923, the three most important fields—Huntington Beach, Long Beach, and Santa Fe Springs—accounted for nearly 80 percent of the state’s record-setting production of 872,000 barrels per day, essentially reversing the regional production percentages of a decade earlier. By that summer, so much oil flowed relentlessly and uncontrollably from southern California that the entire industry seemed on the verge of collapse. The oversupply drove oil prices downward, from $2.15 per barrel for medium gravity crude (suitable for refining into gasoline) in May 1921 to $0.68 per barrel in October 1923. One prominent geologist warned that “neither the industry nor California can continue indefinitely under the present load.”4 Another Californian wrote that the industry was “being choked, and strangled, and gagged, by the very thing most wanted—oil!” Few industry officials, however, admitted that overproduction was anything more than a market problem.5

The Environmental Consequences of Oil Exploitation

These rich new oil fields of the 1920s challenged the technological capabilities of the oil industry. Geological conditions in the Los Angeles basin posed enormous
problems to those engaged in oil extraction; to varying degrees, each oil pool was blanketed with a reservoir of pressurized natural gas. These gas pressures were so great that special drilling technologies had to be employed, or the drilling crew would risk “blowing out” the well. Indeed, reported a journalist about one field’s notorious gas deposits, “nowhere in oldom has the driller been confronted with so many anomalous situations as ran the gamut of Signal Hill’s development.”

The gas pressures in southern California’s fields produced spectacular “blow-outs, gassers, gushers, fires, explosions, craters, geysers and other exciting incidents,” wrote another observer in the popular press. Signal Hill’s discovery well “roared in,” with the gas pressure “shooting a stream of the black gold away above the . . . top of the derrick and spraying the surrounding territory for a distance of 300 feet.” The oil from this gusher later ran “down the center of Hill Street” on Signal Hill, eventually ending up in the Pacific Ocean. A few months later, in January 1922, another Signal Hill well “broke forth as a gasser,” and for twenty-five “uninterrupted hours a terrible rain of oil, rocks, shale and sand poured down,” burying houses “under a destructive rain of oil. The territory for several thousand feet was covered with a pall of black glistening oil.” For several weeks after the gasser was controlled, “the northwestern mesa glistened with the sinister sheen of the black gold. It gleamed from the roof tops. It dripped from the blackened branches of palm trees and shrubbery. It changed the fiery red of the poinsettia to a funeral black. It spattered smiling bungalows and spouted pools of oil over green lawns and trim vegetable gardens.” Earlier that month, in Santa Fe Springs, a “terrific explosion of gas” from one blown-out well hurled “rig, tools, and casing . . . 1000 feet in the air” and covered “the countryside with a deluge of mineral matter.” The deafening roar from the gasser could be heard some eight miles away. Photographs from the period graphically depict large puddles of oil collecting around the base of derricks, and in many cases, flowing downhill into ditches, gullies, and small ravines in the fields.6

These “exciting incidents” are typical examples of oil’s destructive power, demonstrating that the rapidity with which the fields were developed contributed to the pollution problem. Significant portions of the fields in Huntington Beach, Long Beach, and Santa Fe Springs, as well as parts of all other fields, were drilled on “town lots.” The lands above the oil pools were divided into small lots designed for residential construction and held predominantly by small landowners; some parcels measured as small as 25 feet by 112 feet. Under an antiquated legal principle known as the rule of capture, ownership of a deposit devolved on the first person that “captured” the oil, regardless of surface property lines. Oil pools seldom conformed to property boundaries; as oil was pumped from below one lease, oil from the same pool would migrate from another lease on property that conceivably could belong to another company. Thus, the economic incentive rested with the landholder who drilled the first well, and most leases required the drilling contractor to immediately commence operations.7

Oil development was unplanned; the rush to sink the first well produced an enormous waste of oil and gas. During the southern California oil booms of the 1920s, dozens of gushers rained oil over the landscape, ruining orchards, vegetable
fields, and grazing lands. Oil well fires, numbering well into the hundreds by the end of the decade, blackened the sky, shooting "livid towers of flames" one hundred or more feet high. Well fires, in fact, often remain the most vivid and enduring images for people who spent their childhoods near the oil fields. Oil wells released so much pressurized gas that the land sometimes buckled, caved in, and sank. Some contemporary observers warned frantically that the oil fields and surrounding communities might be blown apart in one gigantic firestorm if the gasses underground ignited. Oil exploitation in the Los Angeles basin produced environmental destruction on a grand scale.8

In addition to the pollution caused by the extraction of oil and gas from subterranean reservoirs, pipelines also leaked from time to time. In 1923, one pipeline broke when a nearby gasser erupted; as the crude oil churned to the surface, it was ignited by "gas jets." The burning oil then flowed for six hours down the center of Pacific Avenue in Long Beach, where after a nearly "helpless, hopeless battle," a thousand fire fighters doused the flames, leaving a "dirty, oily mess." On another occasion, the oil from one leaking pipeline in Signal Hill caught fire, causing a "conflagration" which engulfed an entire city block before it was extinguished two hours later. Storage tanks often overflowed and sometimes caught fire; 500,000 barrels of crude "went up in smoke" at Point Fermin, a fashionable section of San Pedro.9 Lightning touched off another spectacular blaze at Union Oil Company's tank farm near Brea in Orange County in April 1926. Two-and-a-quarter million barrels of burning oil, about eight times the amount spilled in the 1989 wreck of the Exxon Valdez, sent clouds of "dense smoke" billowing for miles, obliterating the sun in Brea, where conditions were reported to be "almost as dark as night," and making it impossible for company officials to determine exactly how many of the surface tanks were engulfed in flames. Ultimately, the fire destroyed much of the tank farm, three ranches, some thirty "workmen's cottages," and one hundred acres of citrus and walnut groves.10

Commonplace oil operations caused much of southern California's oil pollution. Government publications identified the origins of such "principal sources of pollution" on the Pacific Coast. Ships routinely dumped their "oil-contaminated bilge and ballast water" into territorial waters, while careless tank-cleaning procedures and improperly conducted bunkering operations further fouled the water with oil. A Standard Oil of California official entrusted with investigating oil pollution admitted with uncharacteristic candor that the "conditions of pollution" were "quite bad." In Los Angeles/Long Beach harbor, oil seemed to be everywhere. A labor newspaper reported that oil was "covering the water of the harbor," reportedly at a depth of four inches, in mid-1923. Oil coated piers and harbor pilings, creating fire hazards.11

Even the Los Angeles Times, a stalwart friend of the state's oil interests, recognized the magnitude of the problem. "Since Los Angeles Harbor became the world's leading oil port," the newspaper reported in September 1925, "the greatest problem of port officials has been in keeping the waters of the bay and channels free of waste oil." Less than a year later, the Times noted that "aggravating [sic] pollution along the coasts," which is "particularly annoying to southern California . . . has
been... greater than at any other point” in the past. “Currents and prevailing westerly winds set the waste oil in on the beaches so thick [that] hundreds of bathers daily are smeared by the tar,” making an after-swim rinse in gasoline or other solvents a mandatory ritual for southern California’s beachgoers. One dockworker, remembering his days loading oil cargoes onto ships in Los Angeles/Long Beach harbor, recalled that even as late as the 1940s, “everything was so oily”—the water, the decks, the hoses, the couplings and other cargo-handling machinery, the railroad cars, the wharves, and even the land adjacent to the docks. Land-based oil pollution emanated from “refineries, oil terminals, oil fields, pipelines, tank farms, and railroads,” as well as from city sewage which was contaminated from oil dumped down street drains. Many of the smaller refineries in the Los Angeles basin lacked adequate filtering and sedimentation facilities to remove petroleum from their wastewater before discharging it into municipal sewage systems. One government body suggested that these smaller companies should combine and share the costs of constructing and operating common settling ponds and a single sewage system. Natural gas plants were important sources of carbon-black and heavy tar pollution, and several such companies had been sued for damaging the environment. Nearly one hundred of these plants operated in the basin by 1927. On innumerable small leases, emulsified oil was simply fed into open sumps (sometimes in city parks, as in Huntington Beach) from which it would eventually escape, ultimately making its way to the ocean. By mid-decade, federal investigators estimated that in the southern Los Angeles basin area, “several hundred barrels” of oil flowed into the Pacific every day from settling ponds alone. Indeed, these everyday oil discharges, from a variety of transportation, refinery, and field practices, were likely responsible for the majority of the region’s oil pollution.13

Government officials recognized the pollution problem. California’s leading fisheries official blamed land sources—refineries, gas plants, and oil fields—for the state’s “worst pollution.” By 1923, numerous commercial fisheries in the state had already been damaged by oil pollution. Testifying before a Senate Committee, fisheries biologist and prominent educator David Starr Jordan noted that the “worst and vilest destruction of fishes, clams, and sea birds occurs when crude oil is poured into the sea... along the California coast.” Another authority claimed that California’s commercial fish catch had declined by 37,500 tons since the onset of extensive oil development a decade earlier; much of the loss, he alleged, was directly attributed to oil pollution. One newspaper reported that market prices for fish had increased dramatically during the early 1920s, as oil pollution contributed to declining stocks. Fish reportedly could not survive in any of the “natural waterways” emptying into Los Angeles/Long Beach harbor. In the mid-1920s, much of the energy of the Bureau of Pollution (later renamed the Bureau of Hydraulics), a division of the state Department of Fish and Game, was expended in investigating and prosecuting oil polluters in the Los Angeles area. The secretary of Santa Ana’s Chamber of Commerce charged that the “entire Southern coast of this state is now suffering from... this nuisance.” By 1927, Long Beach’s citizens were said to have “long complained” of the city’s polluted conditions.15
Oil and the Crisis of Public Authority

As pollution worsened throughout the early 1920s, intense local opposition to oil exploitation developed in the region’s southern suburbs, the center of the oil industry. Immediately after a field’s discovery, local residents embraced oil development in their communities. But concerns over widespread environmental destruction and the degradation of life in the mostly working-class suburban communities of the southland soon encouraged residents to reject oil development. Popular apprehension about unrestrained oil operations ignited the flames of political controversy within these local communities, recasting the political context of oil’s operations in southern California during the 1920s.

The example of the working-class suburb of Lomita illustrates just how profoundly oil development changed the social and political character of the southland. A small community of about four thousand people near the San Pedro harbor district, Lomita was in many ways the typical Los Angeles suburb; located some distance from the center of the metropolis, it was a community of single-family homes whose residents shared, in the words of historian Robert Fogelson, an “anti-urban ethos.” On the eve of oil development, Lomita was an unincorporated area full of “chicken corrals [sic],” “alfalfa patches,” and small dairies. Many of its streets resembled nothing more than “cow trails.” The township lacked gas service, and most residents still cooked on kerosene- or wood-burning stoves. Its local newspaper, the Lomita News-Letter, prided itself on being a “home paper for home folks” and featured weekly columns on local church activities, county farm bureau doings, and cottage gardening techniques. According to one resident, “Lomita is but a thrifty little community of home people.”

The nature of life in Lomita changed radically once oil was discovered in nearby Torrance. By the end of March 1922, the News-Letter noted optimistically that several oil companies were engaged in exploratory drilling in and around Torrance. By June, the newspaper reported that the Torrance field’s discovery well was flowing at one thousand barrels a day. “Factories may yet be pumping oil from our own back yards,” predicted the paper. The next month, headlines proclaimed that “Lomita is now classified in [the] oil belt,” although the township would not see its first derrick erected until mid-September.

Oil excitement abounded in the region. Property values skyrocketed. One company planned to build a gasoline refinery in Torrance, while the Santa Fe Railroad proposed a new line from the refining center of El Segundo through Lomita to Union Oil’s wharves at the harbor. During the late spring and summer of 1922, the Union Tool Company compelled workers at its Torrance shops, many of whom lived in Lomita, to work overtime just to keep up with the rush of orders for oil field equipment. Some three thousand men worked in Torrance’s oil tool manufacturing firms, most of them at the huge Union Tool shops. Drilling companies “spudded” exploration wells to the north and northeast of Lomita (in Gardena, Watts, and Compton). Derricks went up to the west of Lomita, as well as on the eastern outskirts of Redondo Beach. Lomita’s newspaper commented on how life had changed in Torrance, where oil development was especially rapid:
Thousands of oil workers are toiling relentlessly day and night in the local fields . . . The concert of sounds made by the ponderous machinery, gushing steam from exhaust pipes and the steady drive of powerful engines tells the story of immense doings . . . It is becoming more wonderful as the carpenters, who are the vanguards, put up a derrick almost in a day, to be followed by giant truck loads of machinery and oil rigging apparatus. Thus the field grows with magnetic power . . . With every well a success where will the end be?7

Such exhilaration continued throughout the early months of oil development. By December 1922, one booster remarked that “Lomita has much to be thankful for in addition to her many beautiful homes, orchards, and chicken ranches.” Indeed, new derricks were “springing up in most every direction,” as “well-paid, happy workers are piercing the bowels of old Mother Earth” for oil, “that wonderful liquid gold,” which, incidentally, had not yet been discovered in the town. A month later, one writer reported that “Lomita [is] in the throes of an oil boom,” where the “tumol and excitement” of oil development replaced the “peace and quietness” of the township. By the end of that month, the local newspaper had replaced its regular column—“The Cottage Gardener”—with an oil-centered column—“In the Grease: Notes Gleaned While the Oil Editor Bumps Around Proven Territory.” Coverage of local oil developments dominated the front page of every issue of the newspaper for the next eighteen months.8

Despite this effusive optimism, significant opposition to oil development soon appeared in Lomita and surrounding areas. In the midst of its oil boom, one Lomita resident worried that all the oil industry ever did was to “substitute dollar marks for the stars in Old Glory.” Local newspapers rebuked residents for their resistance to oil development, suggesting that popular opposition to oil drilling was increasing during the critical period of development in 1922 and 1923. In the neighboring town of Gardena, the local press asserted that local oil drilling had inaugurated “a progressive epoch” and warned residents that those “who have held to the past must now turn and face the future.” But sometimes even the booster press carried articles foreshadowing a coming shift in public attitudes toward oil. In late 1922, for example, the Lomita News-Letter, a steadfast supporter of the town’s economic development, reprinted “Not For Sale,” a popular poem of the period celebrating the decision of a Texas congreation to reject an oil company’s offer of $100,000 for drilling rights on the grounds of their church.9

Widespread local opposition to oil development usually appeared only months after the first wells had been spudded in any particular community. Oil had so changed the southern California environment that by the summer of 1923 local political skirmishes over oil drilling erupted across the southern half of the Los Angeles basin. In Lomita, residents were reportedly gripped by two controversies surrounding oil exploitation. Should the town enact restrictions on oil drilling to slow the pace of change? Who should pay for the street damage caused by heavy oil service trucks and the increased fire protection needed to accommodate oil development: residents or oil companies? Indeed, Lomita’s judge, L. J. Hunter, warned that unless the township could find some way to control oil drilling opera-
tions, reckless drilling practices would endanger the area’s water table and, at great cost, force local residents and water companies to deepen their water wells. 20

Popular concerns about the financial, social, and environmental costs of oil development further transformed the politics of oil as local communities sought to strengthen the structure of government through incorporation, specifically as a means to control oil operations. As Judge Hunter argued, Lomita must incorporate so that local residents “can control the manner in which the wells are drilled so that the water supply may be protected.” Residents in both La Habra and Norwalk ardently discussed the advantages of incorporation as a means to reduce the negative effects of oil development. The incorporation papers of other towns in the Los Angeles area, such as the working-class suburb of Hawthorne, expressly prohibited oil development within city boundaries. 21

In many southland communities, the process of identifying and regulating the problem of oil pollution arose within a particular institutional framework: the institutions of the working class. Organized labor—especially organized oil workers—represented an important element in the institutions that worked to shape popular protest against environmental destruction during the early 1920s. The depth of popular hostility toward unrestrained oil operations appeared most clearly in southern California’s oil communities where significant numbers of residents were directly employed in oil work. Oil was first discovered in Huntington Beach in 1920, and within two years oil derricks, tanks, pipelines, and sumps dotted the territory surrounding the town, from the ecologically-sensitive Bolsa Chica wetlands on the north, to the bluffs of Newport Beach on the south, to the tidelands of the beach on the west. In 1922, the electorate of Huntington Beach found itself embroiled in a controversy surrounding a local ballot measure, sponsored by the oil industry and real estate developers, that would repeal a city ordinance banning oil drilling in residential and business districts. At issue was the future character of Huntington Beach. Would it remain a working-class residential town, surrounded by oil fields? Or, in the words of preacher, oil worker, and local labor newspaper editor Fred Jackson, would the restrictions be lifted, making the town nothing more than a polluted industrial city, a “mere center of existence for teeming, toiling human life, covered with dust, dirt, and oil”? 22 A fascinating coalition of organized labor, homeowners, and conservationists emerged from the debates over repealing Huntington Beach’s drilling restrictions; similar coalitions developed in other towns where parallel issues arose.

The breakthrough from issue formation to activism in Huntington Beach occurred first among members of the oil workers’ union, who had long recognized that their employers relentlessly exploited both humans and the natural world. Organized oil workers sponsored a variety of events and institutions designed to increase public consciousness of the environmental threats posed by unregulated oil operations. On the eve of the election, the Huntington Beach local of the Oil Workers’ Union hosted a “general clean-up” of the town’s vast, oil-polluted beach. The union, in part, paid for powerful political advertisements in local newspapers advocating further drilling restrictions. Moreover, a local oil worker chaired the “honorable, steady, and far-sighted leadership” of the grassroots citizens’ group,
the Huntington Beach Welfare League, which opposed the repeal of the restrictions. Most of the town’s local unions admonished their members to register to vote for this election; registration figures clearly demonstrate the success of the unions’ efforts to mobilize the electorate, as well as the dramatic changes in the composition of the voting public. With many residents and all of organized labor (including locals of the powerful oil workers’ union) opposing the repeal of the drilling ban, the referendum results seemed preordained. After what one newspaper called a “hotly-contested campaign,” Huntington Beach voters overwhelmingly rejected the industry-sponsored measure, and the restrictions remained in force for most of the decade.23

Popular debates over oil development in the southland intensified, even to explosive proportions, as the oil industry attempted to manipulate the political process to its advantage by openly challenging the public authority of local officials. The largely working-class town of Redondo Beach, located near the south end of Santa Monica Bay, provides a case in point. Desiring to maintain the resort-like quality of their town, the city trustees of Redondo Beach prohibited oil drilling within city boundaries as early as July 1922. Such local actions invariably brought oil industry representatives into local suburban politics. Oil interests challenged the trustees’ order by attempting to force a popular referendum on the issue; the industry flooded the town with hundreds of free copies of California Oil World, a leading industry newspaper, which protested the drilling restrictions. City officials unjustly exercised “the power of absolute life and death over the oil industry within the city limits,” complained the newspaper. Yet no popular vote was held, and oil development work remained outside city limits. As in Huntington Beach, organized labor emerged as a vocal opponent to unrestricted drilling. Fred Jackson, editor of the Long Beach Labor News, presided over special union meetings in Redondo Beach during the conflict and toiled hard to help found a new labor newspaper, the Beach Cities Labor Journal, that became a voice for the working class in seaside communities along Santa Monica Bay, including Redondo Beach. By 1926, Jackson was editor of the Labor Journal; in 1931, the paper advocated drilling restrictions in Santa Monica.24

Referring to the Redondo Beach case, California Oil World predicted that the industry would encounter the same kind of resistance once active drilling began in other newly discovered fields within the basin, predictions that soon came true. The referendum process worked to the advantage of local residents as other communities held elections on oil development, often enacting local ordinances against drilling or refinery operations. In 1923, fearing that oil pollution would endanger their commercial fishing industry, voters in Newport Beach and Balboa (two working-class communities located just south of Huntington Beach) overwhelmingly rejected referendum measures to lease their jointly owned municipal pier for oil development and to construct an oil pipeline and tanker loading station on municipally owned land, a move applauded by local unions. This referendum occurred even after the county Board of Supervisors had authorized construction of the pipeline. Occasionally, such battles resulted in local political realignments. In Newport Beach, the political struggle over the environmental threat posed by
oil development marked the beginning of what would become a “political upheaval” in municipal administration just five years later, when the township’s pro-development trustees were ousted in favor of candidates devoted to municipal ownership of water and power and the regulation of “offensive” industrial practices.²⁵

Similar battles surfaced in other oil towns. In 1922, in a dramatic confrontation during an open city meeting, the Long Beach city attorney forcefully accused the city council of being too quick in accommodating the desires of the oil industry. The council had a yearlong history of hastily rezoning property in order to allow drilling companies to erect derricks and to drill for oil. Long Beach residents had lodged numerous complaints with the city attorney regarding the council’s actions; they began organizing grassroots political organizations, which they called “property owners’ associations,” that further lobbied for more effective regulation of oil corporations. Again, members of organized labor held key positions in many of these associations (Fred Jackson was a key officer in one of the largest of Long Beach’s many property owners’ groups). The mounting political pressure brought by these organizations prompted the city council to delay action on most further rezoning requests (for oil drilling purposes) for the remainder of the year. By early 1923, the political pendulum had swung so far to the other side that the city council began to routinely reject petitions for oil development. In some cases, in an effort to halt “outlaw” oil operations, the city used its powers of eminent domain to condemn property upon which oil drilling had occurred illegally. In January 1923, the city council reversed its earlier position and moved unanimously for the construction and operation of a municipally owned natural gas plant and distribution system, despite roars of protest from private oil corporations.²⁶ At the same time, responding to further public concerns over the ecological consequences of oil development, the council issued the following position statement: “In proportion to the magnitude of the [oil] industry and the rapidity of its growth, is the need of directing it in the public interest, a function that in the case of the city of Long Beach devolves upon this municipal legislative body, which properly declares its convictions upon questions of community concern.”²⁷

Untangling the political alliances formed in opposition to unrestrained oil development in Long Beach remains difficult, but certain groups clearly stressed the need for expansive government control of industry. As in Huntington Beach, the most vocal organization advocating regulation was the oil workers’ union (Long Beach Local 128 of the International Association of Oil Field, Gas Well, and Refinery Workers of America). Union officials exercised their influence within local politics in Long Beach, often meeting with the city’s manager and attorney, as well as with key city councilmen, to discuss development issues. The evils of overproduction, profligate waste, and pollution became recurring topics of discussion at union meetings in the early 1920s, and the union sought to educate local municipal officials about the problem.²⁸

The antithesis of overproduction was conservation. To resolve the crisis, the oil workers’ union sought to harness workers’ understanding of “scientific production methods” in order to ensure more efficient exploitation of existing fields, thus
conserving the resource. Political alternatives designed to conserve oil resources were first suggested in August 1922 by Fred Jackson in the Long Beach Labor News, the official newspaper of the Long Beach Central Labor Council. One year later, Jackson proposed that drilling restrictions be established in southern California’s greatest oil fields as an oil conservation measure; furthermore, he suggested that only government could be trusted to enforce such restrictions. Union members endorsed Jackson’s proposals, discussed at length the “present oil crisis,” and urged each other “not to be bunkoed by the soft soap talk of operators on the over-production of oil.” California Oil Worker, the official newspaper of California’s organized oil workers, even went so far as to indict the management of the Associated Oil Company for “slip-shod” development of some of its southern California fields. According to the newspaper, the company’s action was no less than “criminal,” a “wanton program of destruction.”

In Long Beach, opposition to oil development continued into the late 1920s. In 1927, the residents of one Long Beach neighborhood successfully obtained a city ordinance preventing oil drilling in their neighborhood, despite the industry’s firm opposition. Opponents of oil development in Los Cerritos urged locals to “STOP the black horde—and stop it now—before our residential districts are crushed beyond recognition under the wheels of this plundering horde whose battle cry is ‘Oil! Oil!’”

Even in working-class towns without a strong organized labor movement, opposition to oil development emerged as a critical theme in local politics during the 1920s. In 1921, the city of Torrance initially prohibited wildcat drilling, but quickly repealed the ban once oil was discovered just outside city limits. Less than a year later, Torrance endeavored to “center the oil industry [of southern California] within its borders” by supporting a plan to build a new refinery and massive oil storage facilities within the city. But, just as in Huntington Beach, Long Beach, and other communities, the town’s infatuation with oil was short-lived. In August 1923, the city trustees of Torrance held public meetings to consider an ordinance that would prohibit oil operations throughout the town’s residential and business districts. In a startling front-page editorial reversing its previous position on oil development, the editor of the Torrance Herald advised that city’s residents that

The question of drilling for oil IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THAT HAS EVER CONFRONTED THIS CITY . . . Upon this decision rests the future of Torrance . . . For Torrance will never be BOTH AN OIL FIELD and a thriving city . . . WE HERE DECLARE WITHOUT FEAR OF SUCCESSFUL CONTRADICTION THAT THE ENCROACHMENT OF OIL DERRICKS INTO THE RESTRICTED AREA WILL SOUND THE DEATH KNEEL OF ALL THOSE INSTITUTIONS AND INTERESTS THAT GO TO MAKE A CITY . . . If Torrance is going to REMAIN a city, let’s know it NOW . . . IF Torrance is going to be SMOTHERED TO DEATH by derricks, let’s know it NOW. Then all of us can prepare to MOVE OUT and let the lease-hounds PICK THE CARCASS of a city sacrificed on the altar of OIL AND MISGUIDED MONEY-MADNESS.
That same month, Torrance’s trustees approved the ban on oil drilling in the city’s residential and business districts.

Contested Terrain: Conservation and Corporate Politics

Oil industry leaders were clearly concerned about the developing thrust toward political control of the industry. Organized labor clearly occupied the forefront of this movement. In August 1922, as the Long Beach city council contemplated plans to severely restrict oil production, the California Oil Producers’ Association distributed handbills titled “Long Beach Citizens Should Investigate Before It Is Too Late,” allegedly to alert residents that certain officials of the oil workers’ union were rapidly acquiring too much influence within community politics. The leaflet sharply criticized city officials for welcoming “with open arms” such men “whose activities . . . were notoriously radical.” Industry newspapers issued scathing attacks on Labor News editor Fred Jackson, contending that “union labor journals muckrack [sic], search everywhere for something they can say in disparagement of the men who would give their followers employment. They become the allies of faddists, conservationists, cranks of all kinds in attempts to discredit capital.”

As popular opposition to the industry coalesced throughout the region, the industry press became preoccupied with the issue of government control. The 1923 annual banquet of the Chamber of Mines and Oil, a Los Angeles-based “civic organization,” featured speech after speech outlining the dangers of “bureaucratic control” of the industry. Silencing labor’s voice became an essential element in preventing government regulation. One prominent oilman identified labor problems and “tendencies toward government ownership, control or supervision of industry” as the two most “unfavorable features” confronting the oil and mining industries. He warned that “unless more good men put their shoulders to the wheel and pay more attention to politics, this policy of government ownership, and control, and supervision will push industry to the wall.”

As oil workers slowly developed their movement for government control and as local communities increasingly turned to local government for relief from oil’s destructive power, the industry repeatedly declared that “California oil’s greatest menace is political.” Indeed, during the 1920s, state legislators considered more than fifty separate bills proposing the regulation of virtually every oil industry practice, from the establishment of maximum hours of labor in the oil fields to measures calling for outright public ownership of important branches of the industry. Although many of these measures ended in failure after hard-fought battles, others succeeded. Industry magazines contended that legislative attempts to limit drilling—which were supported by residents of local communities, a majority of southern California’s state lawmakers, and the oil workers’ union—constituted the deadliest “blight of political interference” in the state. “Perverse, treacherous labor leaders,” observed another oil journal, were major advocates of such political measures to control the industry. “All workmen in the industry should, for their own protection,” warned the editors of California Oil World, ignore their union.
leaders and instead “get together and bring whatever pressure they can, and that is considerable too, to halt the foolish and hostile legislation which certain lawmakers at Sacramento are proposing to handicap, harass, and halt the development of oil.” Government control of industry represented nothing less than “state socialism” according to another leading industry publication, which concluded that “the whole move is political, playing to the galleries, attacking the great oil companies all with the idea of currying popular favor with the Andy Gump class.”37 Clearly, the industry vastly underestimated the political power of “Andy Gump” in the southland.

Remarkably, while industry managers lavished attention on local- and state-level regulatory efforts, industry publications rarely mentioned the efforts of Henry Doherty, who had inaugurated a campaign for federal intervention. This apparent lack of concern over Doherty’s crusade suggests that existing public regulation by state and local authorities, not potential regulation by the federal government, provided the true impetus behind the industry’s eventual move toward cooperation in oil exploitation.38

**Conclusion**

The role of the oil industry in precipitating local political crises in suburban Los Angeles during the 1920s suggests one aspect about the development of the region neglected by most historians. Despite its image as a region of unparalleled boosterism, residents of suburban Los Angeles—especially those areas in and around oil districts—did indeed have deep-seated anxieties about unchecked development; people transformed their concerns into concrete proposals for controlling, regulating, and restricting oil operations. The issue of environmental protection thus became a struggle between contending forces seeking to determine the political direction of oil production. At the local level, hard-won, working-class initiatives proved successful in restraining oil’s operations in many locations throughout southern California. Although local limitations on oil development plagued oil operators throughout the 1920s, they rarely resulted in any long-lasting governmental reforms on a more comprehensive level. But these proposals did underlie much of the controversy that spurred the development of an intensely local political culture throughout suburban Los Angeles, a culture that revolved around debates over the pace and character of industrial development in the region. In the years following the oil booms of the 1920s, other matters—the siting of a factory, or the location of a rock quarry—displaced oil as the most contentious issue in local political struggles.39 The local politics of oil demonstrated that conservationists, middle-class reformers, and oil producers held no monopoly on the political process and the regulatory mechanisms of government. In 1920s Los Angeles, working people and conservationists were not dichotomous entities. Working-class residents clearly expressed their concerns about environmental destruction, creatively using the political process to achieve environmental justice and to determine for themselves the future shape of their communities.
Perhaps more importantly, working people helped to frame one of the most important questions confronting the modern world: what is the role of government in the affairs of private industry and civil society? Their demands unequivocally answered that question—the state should intervene in the economy whenever necessary to protect the public interest. The industry was in such great flux during its formative period that local- and state-level political control of oil development was possible in some instances, but ultimately only for a brief time. That these laws were unevenly effective in curbing some of the most flagrant acts of environmental destruction by corporations in California should not detract from their overall significance. These actions had a profound impact upon the larger political economy. Local regulations challenged capital by stripping it of the prerogative to function as it pleased, without restraint. Oil industry managers dreaded political “interference” in industrial operations and vigorously fought regulatory laws even in the smallest oil-producing suburbs of Los Angeles. Moreover, opposition to local-level regulations helped to unite an otherwise intensely divided industry that historically lacked a unified voice. In subsequent years, the oil industry in California developed a powerful, sophisticated political lobby and a vocal public relations branch that gained influence throughout the state in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

One of the principal political goals of this newly united industry was the elimination of the competing claim to civic and moral authority made by the working class. If the industry could excise the union, it would effectively undercut the organizational basis of working-class political expression. When organized oil employers successfully prevented the revitalization of the oil workers’ union in the late 1920s, the emerging working-class conservationism that had flourished for a time withered as well. Not until the late 1930s, when organized labor recovered from its 1920s and early-Depression-era losses, did the oil workers’ union once again take the lead in advocating governmental intervention in the operations of the state’s oil industry. In 1939, a conservation proposal that supported rationing originated in the district council of the oil workers’ union; this proposal, later known as the Atkinson Bill, was ultimately signed into law by Governor Culbert Olson, a Democrat.

Clearly, when the oil industry silenced the political institutions of organized labor in Los Angeles, both humans and the environment suffered. But in those times when labor spoke with vibrancy and political power, the working people of southern California often succeeded in preventing (or at least limiting) the wholesale pollution of this “paradise of sunshine, fruit, and flowers” by the crude practices of oil companies.

Nancy Quam-Wickham teaches Labor, Environmental, and California/Western history at California State University, Long Beach. Her book, The Power of Oil: Culture, Politics, and Development in the American West, 1900–1950s, is forthcoming from the University of California Press.
Notes

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1. See especially the collection of photographs in the Petroleum Industry Collection at the Long Beach Public Library; Rintoul, Spudding In, and Drilling Through Time (Sacramento: California State Department of Conservation, 1990); Franks and Lambert, Early California Oil; Ise, United States Oil Policy; numerous bulletins of the California State Mining Bureau, Division of Oil and Gas; and various technical papers of the U.S. Bureau of Mines.
7. Deed to Ada L. Hathaway, 8 April 1914, Fairview Addition Lot in Huntington Beach, California (Brazammon Realty Company, Los Angeles, California); S. H. Finley Company, *Map of Pacific City* (n.p., 1901, copy in possession of the author) [I am indebted to Barbara Milkovich for both of these references]; Mody C. Boatright and William C. Owens, *Tales from the Derrick Floor* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, 1970), 61.


10. *Los Angeles Times*, 10 April 1926, I-1, 8. Initial reports indicated that three underground reservoirs, each having a capacity of 750,000 barrels, were ablaze, along with an undetermined number of surface tanks, some of them filled with gasoline and other light-end products. This conflagration, however, was dwarfed by another Union Oil tank farm fire, apparently caused by the same electrical storm, in San Luis Obispo County, where six million barrels were aflame. The estimate of oil spilled as a result of the *Exxon Valdez* disaster is from Marguerite Holloway, “Soiled Shores,” *Scientific American*, October 1991, 102–3.

11. U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Mines, *Pollution by Oil of the Coast Waters of the United States*, Preliminary Report (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Mines and American Petroleum Institute, September 1923), 10; *Preliminary Conference on Oil Pollution of Navigable Waters*, Washington, D.C., 8–16 June 1926 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1926), 108, 110; Findley states that “petroleum products accounted for an average of 95.6 per cent of the foreign exports and 96.9 per cent of the coastwise shipments during the decade.” “Economic Boom,” 111–13. Oil companies were quick to point out their roles in harbor development. “Oil has built the magnificent Long Beach harbor,” reported the Richfield Corporation in *Long Beach and Richfield Grow Together* (Long Beach, Calif.: Richfield Corporation, 1955), n.p. See also *Annual Report of the Board of Harbor Commissioners of the City of Los Angeles*, Fiscal Year 1923/24 (Los Angeles, 1924), 1, 41; *Los Angeles Citizen*, 12 October 1923, 4; *California Fish and Game* 9 (1923): 173. So much oil covered harbor waters that longshoremen were prohibited from smoking on the job during some periods of intense pollution.

12. *Los Angeles Times*, 9 September 1925, II-6; 7 June 1926, I-15; Ed Thayne, interview by Harvey Schwartz, Harbor City, Calif., 8 December 1983, ILWU-NEH; *Pollution by Oil*, 10; U.S. Interdepartmental Committee [On Oil Pollution of Navigable Water], *Oil Pollution of Navigable Waters: Report to the Secretary of State*, [13 March 1926] (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1926), 65–66. In the late 1920s, the majority of the Los Angeles basin’s crude oil refineries were small plants having a refining capacity of less than five thousand barrels per day; these smaller plants, however, represented just 10.5 percent of the total refining capacity in the region. See Roy Cross, *A Handbook of Petroleum, Asphalt, and Natural Gas* (Kansas City, Kans.: Kansas City Testing Laboratory, 1928), 91–93, 105–6; *Oil Pollution of Navigable Waters*, 66, 67. Recent studies have
estimated that some two-thirds of all illegal and environmentally damaging releases of oil can be traced to unspectacular, nonaccidental, everyday causes, primarily normal tank vessel operations and "industrial and urban runoff." See Holloway, "Soiled Shores," 116.

13. For historical discussions of contemporary efforts to minimize oil pollution, see Joseph A. Pratt, "Letting the Grandchildren Do it: Environmental Planning During the Ascent of Oil as a Major Energy Source," Public Historian 2 (1980): 28-61; Pratt, "Growth or a Clean Environment? Responses to Petroleum-Related Pollution in the Gulf Coast Refined Region," Business History Review 52 (1980): 1-29; Douglas C. Drake, "Herbert Hoover, Ecologist: The Politics of Oil Pollution Control, 1921-1926," Mid-America 55 (1973): 207-28; E. Downing to National Coast Antipollution League, 27 December 1923, Senate Committee on Commerce, Subcommittee on Pollution of Navigable Waters, Pollution of Navigable Waters: Hearings on Senate Bills 42, 936, and 1388, Relative to the Pollution of Navigable Waters, 68th Cong., 1st sess., 9 January 1924, 9, 53, 62. David Neuberger's assertion that California's commercial fish harvest had decreased by this tonnage is not supported by the commercial fish landings statistics published by the California Department of Fish and Game, which actually show a threefold increase in the tonnage of fin-fish landed in California's harbors during the period in question. However, these same statistics indicate that commercial fin-fish landings did decline by some 5 to 50 percent is some areas, especially in harbors in Southern California's oil regions during the period from 1920 to 1927. Moreover, although fish landings increased in Los Angeles harbor, this increase reflects a tremendous increase in the landings of certain wetfish species, such as sardines and anchovies, and not an overall increase in all fin-fish species. In fact, there was a drastic drop in the harvest of crustaceans (primarily shrimps and spiny lobsters), which as bottom feeders were more vulnerable to stock depletion from pollution than were certain fin-fishes. This important crustacean fishery of southern California never recovered from its 1920s decline. See California Fish and Game, vols. 6-14 (1920-1928). Mechanization, especially the new lampara net brought by Sicilian immigrants, was certainly a factor in the exploitation of new fish stocks. See Arthur F. McEvoy, The Fisherman's Problem: Ecology and Law in the California Fisheries (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), esp. 123-84; Los Angeles Times, 12 September 1925, II:1; California Fish and Game 9 (1923): 173; California Fish and Game 11 (1925): 139; California Fish and Game 12 (1926): 189; California Fish and Game 13 (1927): 65-66, 139, 293-94; California Fish and Game 14 (1928): 80-81, 167-68, 245-47, 315-16; Pollution of Navigable Waters, 68. One investigation found "evidences of oil on each beach [in the Los Angeles area] with the exception of the most northerly one." See Oil Pollution of Navigable Waters, [Report to the Secretary of State], 69.


15. Lomita News-Letter, 31 March 1922, 1; 2 June 1922, 1; 14 July 1922, 1, 3; 28 July 1922, 1.

16. California Oil World, 13 July 1922, 1, 6; Lomita News-Letter, 31 March 1922, 1; 7 April 1922, 1; 7 July 1922, 1; 28 July 1922, 1, 2; 10 November 1922, 1; Torrance Herald, 14 April 1922, 1 September 1922.


21. *Lomita News-Letter*, 31 August 1923, 1, 2. La Habra, an oil town near the Brea-Olinda fields in northern Orange County, was incorporated in 1926, after drilling had resumed in that field; Norwalk bordered the vast Santa Fe Springs oil field. In both communities, fears of ecological damage, declining property values, and concern over such fiscal questions as adequate fire protection merged in the discussions about incorporation. See, for example, Richard L. Kahanek, *A History of Norwalk, Los Angeles County, California* (Norwalk, Calif.: n.p., 1968). See also issues of the *Norwalk Cali*, 1924–1926, and Viehe, “Black Gold Suburbs,” 10–13.

22. This analysis has benefitted from Andrew Szasz’s work on the process of issue identification, activism, and regulatory solutions involving governmental intervention in the market. See Andrew Szasz, *EcoPopulism: Toxic Waste and the Movement for Environmental Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 25–35; *Huntington Beach Labor News*, 27 July 1922, quoted in *Huntington Beach News*, 4 August 1922, 1. In the midst of the campaign, another area labor newspaper asked whether Huntington Beach was doomed to be “anything but an oil town, or an industrial town” where “the worker should never hope to make it anywhere but a place MERELY TO EXIST IN WHILE CREATING WEALTH FOR OTHERS!” *Long Beach Labor News*, 10 August 1922, 1, 8 (emphasis in original). Themes of class exploitation by uncontrolled capital run constantly through the discussion of oil pollution and industry regulation in the southland’s blue-collar communities during the 1920s, and deserve much more scholarly attention.

23. *Long Beach Labor News*, 6 July 1922, 1, 8; 10 August 1922, 1. From 1920 to 1922, the absolute number of Huntington Beach voters rose from 710 to 2,113, while the relative percentage of blue-collar male voters in the electorate increased from 20.8 percent to 47.9 percent. *Orange County Great Register of Voters, 1920, 1922*, City of Huntington Beach, California State Library, Sacramento. An analysis of election statistics reveals that opposition to the measure was strongest in those city precincts having the highest percentages of oil worker residents. The 1922 campaign is reviewed in *California Oil World*, 10 August 1922, 8; 24 August 1922, 1, 6. Election statistics can be found in the Office of the Orange County Clerk. See also *Huntington Beach News*, 4 August 1922, 1; 11 August 1922, 4; 18 August 1922, 1. A few months later, the ordinance was upheld in a ruling by a judge of the Superior Court, who forcefully reaffirmed the right of local communities to enact such restrictions, under the provisions of the California Municipal Code. *Huntington Beach News*, 26 January 1923, 1. The new working-class character of Huntington Beach is illustrated in Barbara Ann Milkovich, “A Study of the Impact of the Oil Industry on the Development of Huntington Beach, California, Prior to 1930,” M.A. thesis (California State University, Long Beach, 1988), 97–98, 100, 112, 122–25.

24. *California Oil World*, 13 July 1922, 1, 6; 20 July 1922, 1, 3, 6, 7; 27 July 1922, 1; *Lomita News-Letter*, 28 July 1922, 1, 2; *Los Angeles Citizen*, 15 September 1922, 4; 19 February 1926; *Los Angeles Times*, 1931, in “Oil-1930s Clippings File, LBPL.”

25. *California Oil World*, 22 June 1922, 1, 3; *Huntington Beach News*, 6 July 1923, 1, 8; 27 July 1923, 1, 2; Wilhelmina L. Breuer, “A Sociological Community Study of Newport-Balboa,” M.A. thesis (University of Southern California, 1932), 16–19, 40–41,
82–83. The new township management was responsible for having the manager of a
local oil refinery arrested for polluting the air a few years later.

26. Long Beach Labor News, 18 January 1923, 1; Long Beach City Council Meeting
Minutes, Office of the Long Beach City Clerk, Long Beach, California, 18 July 1922 (vol.
003C, 156–7), 25 July 1922 (vol. 003C, 182), 1 August 1922 (vol. 003C, 204), 7 August 1922
(vol. 003C, 214), 30 January 1923 (vol. 005C, 217). Government ownership of public
utilities was endorsed by a broad coalition of citizens in the 1920s—consumers’ groups,
farmers’ associations, even the officially nonpartisan American Federation of Labor
(AFL). In 1923, for example, the annual convention of the AFL passed a resolution
favoring “nationwide state ownership of water and power.” See California Oil Worker,
8 November 1923, 1, 2, 4. The California Conference for Progressive Political Action,
the political arm of the state Federation of Labor, similarly urged government ownership
of the state’s public utilities. The debate raged over the issue of municipalizing
natural gas in Long Beach for nearly a year after the council’s decision, with organized
labor leading the campaign for public ownership. See Long Beach Labor News, 8
November 1923, 1, 6; 20 December 1923, 2; 27 December 1923, 1, 5; 3 January 1924, 1, 4;
10 January 1924, 1, 5; 17 January 1924, 1; 24 January 1924, 1, 4, 5.

27. Resolution following action to ban oil drilling at the Sunnyside property, Long Beach
City Council Meeting Minutes, Office of the Long Beach City Clerk, Long Beach,
California, 30 January 1923 (vol. 005C, 204, emphasis added).

28. Meeting Minutes, Long Beach Local No. 128, Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers
Union (OCAW), 7 August 1922, 14 August 1922, 6 February 1924, 13 February 1924, 20
February 1924, Folders 1 and 2, Box 1, Series IV, OCAW Local 128 Collection, Western
Historical Collection, University of Colorado, Boulder [hereafter Local 128 Minutes].
With more than one thousand members, Local 128 was the largest union local in the
city before 1925.

29. California Oil World, 7 September 1922, 8; Local 128 Minutes, 7 August 1922. Jackson,
along with international organizer Adolph Germer, union adviser Walter Yarrow, and a
number of other local union officials, continued his call for production controls through
government management of the industry throughout 1923 and 1924, during the depths
of California’s oil crisis. California Oil Worker, 6 December 1923, 2.

presented at the annual meeting of the Oral History Association, Long Beach, Calif.,
1986; Andriesse, “Los Cerritos: The Development of a Neighborhood,” The Branded
Word [newsletter of the Rancho Los Cerritos Historic Site], Summer 1987, 5 (thanks to
Kaye Briegel for these materials).


32. Torrance Herald, 10 August 1923, reprinted in Lomita News-Letter, 17 August 1923, 1
(emphasis in the original).

33. California Oil World, 10 August 1922, 8.

34. California Oil World, 20 July 1922, 6, 7 (emphasis added).

35. Mining and Oil Bulletin 9 (1923): 184, 188.

36. The breadth of these proposed regulations, the important cross-section of the political
spectrum represented in the backgrounds of bill proponents, and the extent of public
support—especially among the (organized) working class—for such measures reveals
the depth of these political struggles. Legislation declaring the state’s oil industry a
“public utility” subject to state regulation and providing for state-owned and operated
oil transportation systems were both introduced by progressive Republicans in the As-
sembly during the 1921 legislative session; they were later defeated by conservatives in
the Senate, many of whom were distinguished by their antilabor voting records. In
subsequent legislative sessions, progressive Republicans spearheaded efforts to regulate
the state’s oil industry, with partial success. Virtually all lawmakers proposing measures
to regulate oil industry practices received favorable ratings for their voting records from
the California State Federation of Labor’s Committee on Labor Legislation and Legis-
lators, suggesting that there were relatively strong links between organized labor and
these progressives. Similar links apparently existed between organized oil workers and
legislators at the federal level. Both Charles Randall, who had introduced a congres-
sional bill in 1916 calling for government ownership of the oil industry, and Walter
Lineberger, who had introduced the first oil pollution control bill in the House in the
early 1920s, were Long Beach progressives who enjoyed widespread support from orga-
nized labor. Jerome B. Kavanaugh and Ellsworth E. Eustice, comps., Assembly Final
History: Forty-Fourth Session, 1921 (Sacramento, Calif.: State Printing Office, 1921), 72,
359; Mary Ann Mason, “Neither Friends Nor Foes: Organized Labor and the Califor-
nia Progressives,” in California Progressivism Revisited, ed. William Deverell and Tom
Sitton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 57–71; Long Beach Labor News,
8 November 1923, 3; Robert DeWitt Morgans, “A History of Organized Labor in Long
Beach, California,” M.A. thesis (University of California, Berkeley, 1940), 51–62; Marion
Dixon, “The History of the Los Angeles Central Labor Council,” M.A. thesis (Univer-
sity of California, Berkeley, 1929), 166–85, 191–200; Ray Davidson, Challenging the
Giants (Denver, Colo.: Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers International Union, 1988),
53.
37. California Oil World, 8 February 1923, 1; 22 February 1923, 8; Mining and Oil Bulletin
9 (1923): 22.
38. Many historians credit Doherty for popularizing the idea of government intervention
in the oil industry, and some have suggested that Doherty’s campaign galvanized a
chaotic industry in California to unite in opposition to government control. See, for
example, Norman E. Nordhouser, The Quest for Stability: Domestic Oil Regulation,
of most production agreements in California after 1924. State Government and Eco-


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