# Denis Kearney Biography

## Denis Kearney

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# Biography

Denis Kearney (1847-1907), Irish-born American labor agitator, became the leader of unemployed workingmen of San Francisco during the 1870s.

Denis Kearney was born in County Cork on Feb. 1, 1847. He went to sea as a cabin boy at the age of 11 and rose to the rank of first mate by 1868, when he first arrived in San Francisco. For 4 years Kearney served as an officer on a coastal steamer but left his job after he was accused of deserting the ship in danger. He married in 1870 and in 1872 settled in San Francisco, where he purchased a hauling business. By 1877, when he emerged as a representative of the Draymen and Teamsters' Union, Kearney owned three wagons. He studied public speaking and frequented newspaper offices, where he exchanged views on current affairs and social philosophy.

Although he had no coherent ideology, Kearney seemed to attribute the distress of the working class to their shiftlessness; and on one occasion, at least, he stated that white workers should emulate the thrift and industry of the many Chinese on the West Coast. In 1877 he was elected secretary of the Workingmen's Trade and Labor Union of San Francisco.

However, in September 1877 Kearney called for the organization of an independent workingmen's party and initiated a series of meetings on a vacant lot adjoining City Hall. These "sandlot meetings," usually held on Sundays, were Kearney's focus of activity for 3 years. The crowds grew to over 2,000, and Kearney spoke eloquently on such themes as uniting all the poor and workingmen, land monopoly, and the "dangerous encroachments of capital." He warned especially that the presence of cheap Chinese labor robbed "Americans" of decent employment.

Kearney's platform manner was rude but effective, drawing on all the oratorical tricks of the day. His inflammatory speeches carefully stopped short of incitement to riot, but his followers frequently struck out at San Francisco's Chinese population. The Workingmen's party failed because of internal dissensions and the strong reaction against the party. Kearney was himself repudiated by the sandlotters when he supported the Greenback-Labor presidential candidate in 1880. Between 1880 and 1883 he spoke occasionally but could not command enthusiastic support. In 1883 he returned to private life, built up a profitable drayage business and employment agency, and invested successfully in stocks, real estate, and commodities. He died on April 24, 1907, a wealthy and even socially acceptable businessman.