The tables turned: you sabe him? Kealney [i.e. Kearney] must go!, 1877 or 1878

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Collection Summary

Collection Title: The Tables Turned: You Sabe Him? Kealney [i.e. Kearney] Must Go!

Date: 1877 or 1878

Collection Number: BANC PIC 1993.020--AX

Extent: 1 print: lithograph, color; image 25 x 33 cm. on sheet 28 x 36 cm.1 digital object

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Languages Represented: Collection materials are in English

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Preferred Citation

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Acquisition Information

The Tables Turned lithograph was purchased in 1993.
Biography

Denis Kearney was born February 1, 1847 in Oakmount, County Cork, Ireland. Never to receive formal education, Kearney went to sea at age 11. After working on several American ships, he settled in San Francisco in 1868 and established a draying business. Endowed with great charisma and attracted to public oratory, Kearney began to deliver agitational speeches to the growing crowds of unemployed laborers which gathered in the sand lots near San Francisco's City Hall during the depression years of the 1870s. By September of 1877, after developing a loyal following, Kearney became the leader of the newly-organized Workingmen's Party of California. The primary rallying point of the party was to protest Chinese workers' acceptance of lower wages, poorer conditions, and longer hours than white workers were willing to tolerate. Under Kearney's slogan, "The Chinese Must Go!", this scapegoat tactic led to mob violence and to demands that Chinese immigration be legally prohibited. Other reforms on the Workingmen's Party agenda included the abolition of land monopoly and the eradication of corruption in public office. In November of 1877, in response to Kearney's "incendiary" speeches and the rioting associated with his leadership, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors issued a general order prohibiting any action or speech deemed to threaten the civil order. By early 1878 Kearney had been arrested several times for violation of this "gag law" and other infractions. Eventually acquitted of the charges, Kearney simultaneously attained a statewide allegiance. In short time, the Workingmen's Party became such a viable force in California politics that it was influential in establishing many reforms in the newly-drafted state Constitution of 1879. The efforts of the Workingmen's Party were eventually decisive in the passage of the federal Exclusion Act of 1882, which prohibited Asian immigration to the United States. Following a failed attempt to nationalize the Workingmen's Party and a waning of public enthusiasm for reform in California, Kearney's presence in state politics quickly declined. After 1880, Kearney gradually re-directed his attention to business, occasionally making modest public appearances to speak on contemporary issues. Denis Kearney died in Alameda, California on April 24th, 1907.

Scope and Content

The lithograph entitled "The Tables Turned: You Sabe Him? Kealney [i.e. Kearney] must go!" was published by book producer I.N. Choynski in San Francisco, probably in late 1877 or early 1878. The print depicts labor leader Denis Kearney behind bars in the San Francisco House of Correction, where Kearney was detained for numerous violations of a "gag law" hastily established to curb his agitation of San Francisco's unemployed laborers. Outside the cell, a group of Chinese workers heckle Kearney, offering him the products (cigars, laundry, seafood) of their various jobs. The print's title alludes to Kearney's rallying slogan, "The Chinese Must Go!", with which he often concluded his speeches. During the state's depression years of the 1870s, the Chinese --by then a common target for scapegoating --were criticized and often persecuted by labor activists for their acceptance of low-paying jobs. The anti-Chinese sentiment of this time was so extreme as to lead to violent riots and various legal demands --many of which were met --ranging from taxing Chinese employees to expelling them from the state.