

Workers Strike Back

As industrialization occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century many Americans became concerned that the new corporate giants were manipulating their business to benefit a few but exploit everyone else – especially workers. Workers responded by organizing and developing labor unions in an effort to negotiate directly with employers and to lobby government for laws that would protect workers.

The National Labor Union, organized in 1866 by William Sylvis and Andres Cameron, represented a giant leap by workers. One of the earliest national-scale unions to organize in the Americas or Europe, it aimed to unify workers across locales and trades to challenge their ever more powerful bosses. The union lasted six years and attracted the impressive total of some 600,000 members, including the skilled, unskilled, and farmers, though in keeping with the times, it excluded the Chinese and made only nominal efforts to include women and blacks. The National Labor Union agitated for the arbitration of industrial disputes and the eight-hour workday, winning the latter for government workers. But the devastating depression of the 1870s and the Great Railroad Strike of 1877 dealt it a knockout blow. Wage cuts instituted by several major railroad companies (for the third year in a row) led to nation's first major rail strike. Rail workers walked off the job and blocked trains. Violence broke out in cities like Baltimore, Chicago, Kansas City, Pittsburg, and San Francisco. The strike only came to an end when President Hayes sent in federal troops.

The most important union of the late nineteenth century was the Knights of Labor founded in 1869 as a secret society of tailors in Philadelphia. The organization grew slowly during the hard years of the 1870s, but worker militancy rose toward the end of the decade, especially after the Great Railroad Strike of 1877, and the Knights' membership rose with it. Grand Master Workman Terence V. Powderly took office in 1879, and under his leadership the Knights flourished; by 1886 the group had 700,000 members. Powderly dispensed with the earlier rules of secrecy and committed the organization to seeking the eight-hour day, abolition of child labor, equal pay for equal work, and political reforms including the graduated income tax.

Unlike most trade unions of the day, the Knights' unions were vertically organized—each included all workers in a given industry, regardless of trade. The Knights were also unusual in accepting workers of all skill levels and both sexes; blacks were included after 1883 (though in segregated locals). On the other hand, the Knights strongly supported the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Contract Labor Law of 1885; like many labor leaders at the time, Powderly believed these laws were needed to protect the American work force against competition from underpaid laborers imported by unscrupulous employers.

Powderly believed in boycotts and arbitration, but he opposed strikes. He had only marginal control over the union membership, however, and a successful strike by the Knights against Jay Gould's southwestern railroad system in 1884 brought a flood of new members. By the beginning of 1886, there were 700,000 Knights of Labor. Strikes by industrial workers were increasingly common in the United States. The American labor movement during this time also included a radical faction of socialists, communists, and anarchists who believed the capitalist system should be dismantled because it exploited workers. Members of the Knights participated—again, over Powderly's objections—in a general labor strike held at Haymarket Square in Chicago on May 1, 1886. The strike was organized by labor radicals to protest the killing and wounding of several workers by the Chicago police during a strike the day before at the McCormick Reaper Works. Toward the end of the rally, a group of policemen arrived to disperse the crowd. As the police advanced, an individual who was never identified threw a

bomb at them. Chaos ensued and seven police officers and at least one civilian died as a result of the violence that day. The riot at Haymarket Square May 4 triggered a national wave of arrests and repression, labor activism of every kind suffered a setback, and the Knights were particularly—though unfairly—singled out for blame. By 1890, the membership had fallen to 100,000. Although Powderly's somewhat erratic leadership and the continuing factionalism within the union undoubtedly contributed to the Knights' demise, the widespread repression of labor unions in the late 1880s was also an important factor. Many Americans concluded that the union movement was radical and violent. Employers went on the offensive by using violence and strikebreakers to break strikes, compiling blacklists of strikers, and forcing workers to sign yellow-dog contracts (an agreement in which a worker, as a condition of employment, agrees to not join a union).

In December of 1886, the same year the Knights of Labor was dealt its fatal blow at Haymarket Square, Samuel Gompers met with the leaders of other craft unions to form the American Federation of Labor. The A.F. of L. was a loose grouping of smaller craft unions, such as the masons' union, the hatmakers' union or Gompers's own cigarmakers' union. Every member of the A.F. of L. was therefore a skilled worker.

Gompers had no visions of uniting the entire working class. Tradespeople were in greater demand and already earned higher wages than their unskilled counterparts. Gompers knew that the A.F. of L. would have more political and economic power if unskilled workers were excluded. He served as president of the union every year except one until his death in 1924.

Although conservative in nature, Gompers was not afraid to call for a strike or a boycott. The larger A.F. of L. could be used to support these actions, as well as provide relief for members engaged in a work stoppage. By refusing to pursue a radical program for political change, Gompers maintained the support of the American government and public. By 1900, the ranks of the A.F. of L. swelled to over 500,000 tradespeople. Gompers was seen as the unofficial leader of the labor world in America.

Simplicity worked. Although the bosses still had the upper hand with the government, unions were growing in size and status. There were over 20,000 strikes in America in the last two decades of the 19th century. Workers lost about half, but in many cases their demands were completely or partially met. The A.F. of L. served as the preeminent national labor organization until the Great Depression when unskilled workers finally came together. In 1955 it combined with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (which had been founded in 1932) to form the largest labor union in the United States. From 1955 to 2005 it will represent nearly all unionized workers in the United States.

Despite the success of the A.F. of L. in attracting members, two violent incidents in the 1890s stalled the emerging union movement. The Homestead strike, in Homestead, Pennsylvania, pitted one of the most powerful new corporations, Carnegie Steel Company, against the nation's strongest trade union, the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers. An 1889 strike had won the steelworkers a favorable three-year contract; but by 1892 Andrew Carnegie was determined to break the union. His plant manager, Henry Clay Frick, stepped up production demands, and when the union refused to accept the new conditions, Frick began locking the workers out of the plant.

On July 2 all were discharged. The union, limited to skilled tradesmen, represented less than one-fifth of the thirty-eight hundred workers at the plant, but the rest voted overwhelmingly to join the strike. An advisory committee was formed, which directed the strike and soon took

over the company town as well. Frick sent for three hundred Pinkerton guards, but when they arrived by barge on July 6 they were met by ten thousand strikers, many of them armed. After an all-day battle, the Pinkertons surrendered and were forced to run a gauntlet through the crowd. In all, nine strikers and seven Pinkertons were killed; many strikers and most of the remaining Pinkertons were injured, some seriously.

The sheriff, unable to recruit local residents against the strikers, appealed to Governor William Stone for support; eight thousand militia arrived on July 12. Gradually, under militia protection, strikebreakers got the plant running again. Frick's intransigence had won sympathy for the strikers, but an attempt on his life by anarchist Alexander Berkman on July 23 caused most of it to evaporate. Meanwhile, the corporation had more than a hundred strikers arrested, some of them for murder; though most were finally released, each case consumed much of the union's time, money, and energy. The strike lost momentum and ended on November 20, 1892. With the Amalgamated Association virtually destroyed, Carnegie Steel moved quickly to institute longer hours and lower wages. The Homestead strike inspired many workers, but it also underscored how difficult it was for any union to prevail against the combined power of the corporation and the government.

The most famous and far-reaching labor conflict in a period of severe economic depression and social unrest, the Pullman Strike began May 11, 1894, with a walkout by Pullman Palace Car Company factory workers after negotiations over declining wages failed. These workers appealed for support to the American Railway Union (ARU), which argued unsuccessfully for arbitration. On June 20, the ARU gave notice that beginning June 26 its membership would no longer work trains that included Pullman cars.

The boycott, although centered in Chicago, crippled railroad traffic nationwide, until the federal government intervened in early July, first with a court injunction essentially forbidding all boycott activity and then by dispatching regular soldiers to Chicago and elsewhere. The soldiers joined with local authorities in getting the trains running again, though not without considerable vandalism and violence. ARU president Eugene Victor Debs was arrested and subsequently imprisoned for disregarding the injunction. The boycott and the union were broken by mid-July, partly because of the ARU's inability to secure broader support from labor leaders.

George Pullman attracted broad criticism and his workers sympathy. A federal panel appointed to investigate the strike sharply criticized the company's paternalistic policies and refusal to arbitrate, advancing the idea of the need for unions and for increased government regulation in an age of large-scale industrialization. However, the use of an injunction for such purposes, upheld by the Supreme Court in 1895, was a setback for unionism, and most public sentiment was against the boycott.

Industrial workers organized to fight for their rights. New unions sought to protect worker's rights. The nation was wracked by strikes. Grand visions of a different kind of society were born but not achieved. Basic demands – for higher pay, safer conditions, shorter work days were not achieved in the 19th century and it will be several decades before the American perception of the labor movement began to change.