



Workers Organize

20-4

One of the biggest effects of the growth of industry in the US in the late 1800s was the development of labor unions. In response to challenging working conditions and economic hardships, workers in the US tried to prove that there was strength in numbers. While the impact of the earliest labor unions wasn't incredible long lasting or earth-shattering, the unions set the stage for labor unions pushing for benefits for workers in today's world. Print and read "Labor Unions in the 19th Century" to get an overview of the topic. Then, using Chapter 20 Section 4 and the online resources provided, complete the following activity dealing with labor unions then and now.

Railroad Strike of 1877	Homestead Strike	Haymarket Riot	Pullman Strike	Knights of Labor	Knights of Labor	American Federation of Labor
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Workers Face Hardships - Construct a bulleted list of the major challenges or poor working conditions faced by workers in the late 1800s. You may also want to visit [Child Labor in America](#) from The History Place to see some pretty amazing images!

Early Unions, Union Setbacks, The Homestead and Pullman Strikes, Gompers Founds the AFL - Read these sections and the links provided to complete the charts below.

LABOR UNION	Major leader	description of members	major goals	impact/decline
Knights of Labor				
American Federation of Labor				

STRIKE	Why were the workers mad?	What did the workers do in protest?	How did ownership / government respond?	What was the eventual result of the strike?	What impact did the strike have on the labor movement?
Railway Strike of 1877					
Haymarket Riot					
Homestead Strike					
Pullman Strike					

Make a list of the challenges labor unions faced, including public and government response:

LABOR UNIONS IN THE 19th CENTURY

It is no surprise that the interests of employers and the people who work for them are not always the same. Conflict and dissatisfaction between boss and employee have existed as long as there have been some people who have worked for others. Throughout much of history the advantage lay clearly with the employer. There have been occasional attempts by workers to take advantage of the fact that they outnumber their employers, but these efforts were often suppressed by the powers that be. Roman slaves led by the gladiator Spartacus, for example, rebelled against the system; but their movement was crushed by the Roman army. In the medieval period, master craftsmen formed guilds to set standards for their work and set fair prices. But their organizations didn't affect conditions for the common laborers, who earned low wages and worked long hours.

With the coming of the Industrial Revolution, work and working conditions changed drastically. Many handcrafts requiring years of training to master were replaced by factory jobs requiring minimal skills but paying little and offering long hours and unsafe conditions. The factory jobs did, however, bring large groups of workers together, and they soon began to find common cause with one another. In Britain, Western Europe and, by the 1830s and 1840s, in the United States, workers' organizations were forming to put pressure on employers to provide better pay and working conditions. After the Civil War, as mass production and corporate profits grew dramatically, more workers found themselves in industrial jobs under far less than ideal conditions. In these companies, workers were numerous and personally detached from their employers, who usually had little or no personal contact or relationship with their employees. Since workers were abundant in the United States, due to large-scale immigration from Europe and from rural areas of the United States, employers sought to pay the workers as little as possible. Workers, living in crowded tenements near industrial centers, grew more and more dissatisfied.

The views of the corporate leaders did little to ease their concerns. They interpreted "liberty" to mean that you should be able to run your business as you choose. Business was private enterprise, beyond the proper scope of government oversight, and how you treated your workers was your own affair. There were few laws that protected the workers, and so as long as you didn't deliberately murder them or physically assault them, you could treat them as you wished. If they didn't like it, they were free to quit and seek a job elsewhere. The prevalent view of the time was Social Darwinism, an application of the ideas of biologist Charles Darwin that saw life as a competition in which the fittest survived and the weak died off. In the eyes of the capitalists, their success proved their fitness, and the poverty of the workers was proof of their inferiority. To interfere with this would be to violate a law of nature.

Workers responded to these conditions by forming associations known as unions that tried to capitalize on the advantage of numbers that they had over the employers. The unions did not all share the same views otherwise. Some were influenced by the writings of Karl Marx and other leaders of the Socialist movement. They saw society in a different way than the traditional view. To the socialists, society is a continuing struggle between the rich and few who control the wealth of the society and the poor and many who don't. This constant struggle by the rich to keep their wealth, and the poor to get a bigger share of it, is what drives historical events. Socialists saw the rise of big business in the late 19th century and the poverty of the working class as proof that the system of free market capitalism didn't work and that a more equitable social system was necessary. The socialist labor unions saw themselves as fighting in the struggle to force the rich to share the resources more equally, or failing that, taking control of the industries from the corporations, whom they saw as exploiting the workers, and putting the industries under public ownership.

Corporate management naturally saw this idea as dangerous in the extreme, threatening their wealth and power, and was quick to label these union leaders as radicals. Other union leaders saw the struggle a different way. They didn't have a particular problem with capitalism and free enterprise. They just felt that they needed to use different methods to compete more effectively for more of the profits. If an individual worker approached management for a raise, there was no incentive for the boss to give him/her more money. He could fire the person and replace him/her easily, with little disruption to his business. However, if most or all of the workers collectively demanded better wages and threatened to withhold their work (strike) if they didn't get them, this could disrupt the company, cost the company money and, hopefully, convince the employer that it would be cheaper and easier to give in to the union's demands. In other words, the union was trying to market their product, their work, in the most profitable way, like corporations tried to market their products. Union leaders later used this idea another way. If the union could guarantee a political leader running for office large blocks of workers' votes if the candidate supported union interests (or guarantee those votes would go elsewhere if he didn't support union interests), they could get a government more in line with their views.

In the late 1800s, however, management was usually in no mood to give in to union demands, and government usually sided with the companies. Labor disputes were contentious and sometimes became violent, with companies hiring private security forces to physically intimidate the unions and union actions turning into strikes, riots or full scale street battles with union workers and unemployed workers fighting company security, police, or sometimes government troops. In 1877, a railroad strike shut down trains in the entire eastern half of the country for weeks and caused major fighting. In 1886, a demonstration by workers in Haymarket Square in Chicago turned violent when the police showed up, a bomb exploded among the police and the police opened fire on the crowd. In Homestead, Pennsylvania in 1892, Andrew Carnegie's Homestead Steel Company tried to break the steelworkers' union by locking union members out of the plant. The workers responded by attacking the Pinkerton guards hired by the company to keep them out. It took the Pennsylvania National Guard to restore order. There were other violent confrontations.

The philosophy of business leaders and the government at the time was that business operated best without a great deal of government oversight or regulation. It was thought that the laws of supply and demand operating in a free market would result in the best products and services at the lowest cost to the general consumer. This thinking applied to unions in that the government generally should not interfere in how businesses operated and dealt with their employees. This theory was also known as laissez-faire capitalism, taken from a French term, roughly meaning, "leave it be." In practice, however, since the days of Alexander Hamilton as Treasury Secretary, the government had followed a policy of encouraging, supporting and sometimes subsidizing business activities. Industry and development were encouraged by the government with programs like the building of the canal systems, the railroad subsidies for the building of railroads, and the protective tariffs. As the businesses grew richer, corporate leaders and political leaders found common interest in the money and political power that each group controlled. The result was that by the late 19th century, it could hardly be said that government had a neutral role regarding conflicts between the unions and their corporate employers. It would be well into the 20th century before unions began to draw significant support from political leaders.