

The Right to Strike

In 1890, labor leader Samuel Gompers testified before a government labor commission. Describing the condition of workers, he argued that unions and strikes were the only way workers' rights could be expanded.

“We recognize that peaceful industry is necessary to successful civilized life, but the right to strike and the preparation to strike is the greatest preventive to strikes. If the workmen were to make up their minds to-morrow that they would under no circumstances strike, the employers would do all the striking for them in the way of lesser wages and longer hours of labor.”

—Report on the (U.S.) Industrial Commission on Capital and Labor, 1890

◀ Immigrants paint machinery in a Cleveland, Ohio, factory.

The Organized Labor Movement

Objectives

- Assess the problems that workers faced in the late 1800s.
- Compare the goals and strategies of different labor organizations.
- Analyze the causes and effects of strikes.

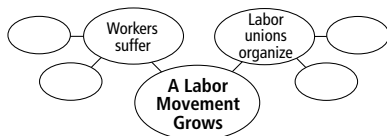
Terms and People

sweatshop
company town
collective bargaining
socialism
Knights of Labor
Terence V. Powderly

Samuel Gompers
AFL
Haymarket Riot
Homestead Strike
Eugene V. Debs
Pullman Strike

NoteTaking

Reading Skill: Identify Main Ideas Record the main ideas about the rise of organized labor.



Why It Matters As industrialization intensified, the booming American economy relied heavily on workers to fuel its success. But struggles between business owners and workers also intensified, as workers rebelled against low pay and unsafe working conditions. To keep the economy thriving, Americans had to find ways to ease the tensions between business owners and workers. **Section Focus Question:** How did the rise of labor unions shape relations among workers, big business, and government?

Workers Endure Hardships

The industrial expansion in the United States made the American economy grow by leaps and bounds. Industrial growth produced great wealth for the owners of factories, mines, railroads, and large farms. It also brought general improvements to American society in the form of higher standards of living, wider availability of cheap goods, and access to public institutions like museums and schools. However, the people who actually performed the work in factories and industries struggled to survive. In addition, workers—especially immigrants, women, and minorities—often faced ridicule and discrimination.

Factory Work In the 1880s and 1890s, factory owners, seeking to maximize profits, employed people who would work for low wages. Immigrants made up a large percentage of the workforce. Far from

home, lacking good English-speaking skills, and often very poor, immigrants would generally take almost any job. Factory workers toiled long hours—12 hours a day, 6 days a week—in small, hot, dark, and dirty workhouses known as **sweatshops**. These sweatshops employed thousands of people, mainly women, who worked for long hours on machines making mass-produced items. Owners ensured productivity by strictly regulating workers' days. Owners clocked work and break hours, and they fined workers for breaking rules or working slowly.

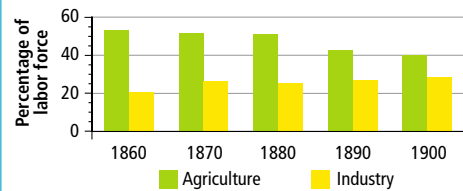
Factory work was often dangerous. Workspaces were poorly lit, often overheated, and badly ventilated. Some workers lost their hearing from the noisy machines. Accidents were common, both from faulty equipment and lack of proper training. Despite the harsh conditions, employers suffered no shortage of labor. There were always more people than jobs.

Families in the Workforce As industrialization advanced, more jobs opened up for women. They worked as laundresses, telegraph operators, and typists. But most women—and their families—worked in the factories. Since low wages meant that both parents needed jobs, bringing children to work kept them off the streets and close to their parents. It also meant that the children could earn a wage, which helped the family to survive. By the end of the 1800s, nearly one in five children between the ages of 10 and 16 worked rather than attending school. Conditions were especially harsh for these children. Many suffered stunted physical and mental growth. By the 1890s, social workers began to lobby to get children out of factories and into child care or schools. Eventually, their efforts prompted states to pass legislation to stop child labor.

Living in Company Towns Many laborers, especially those who worked in mines, were forced to live in isolated communities near their workplaces. The housing in these communities, known as **company towns**, was owned by the business and rented out to employees. The employer also controlled the “company store,” where workers were forced to buy goods. The company store sold goods on credit but charged high interest. As a result, by the time the worker received wages, most of the income was owed back to the employer. Since workers could be arrested if they left their jobs before they repaid these loans, employers could hold workers to their jobs through a system that workers’ advocates called “wage slavery.” Through its management of the company town, employers could also reinforce ethnic competition and distrust. For example, Mexican, African American, or Chinese workers could be segregated in separate towns.

 **Checkpoint** How did working conditions affect families?

Shifts in U.S. Labor Force



SOURCE: Historical Statistics of the United States

A Changing Workforce

In the late 1800s, the number of Americans working in agriculture steadily declined. *Describe the growth in the industrial workforce between 1860 and 1900.*

Child Laborers

Adults supervise child workers in a textile factory circa 1890. A Pennsylvania job advertisement from the late 1800s called for workers “with large families.”



Labor Unions Form

Industrialization lowered the prices of consumer goods, but in the late 1800s most factory workers still did not earn enough to buy them. Increasingly, working men and women took their complaints directly and forcefully to their employers. Employers usually opposed the growing labor movement, which they saw as a threat to their businesses and profits.

Early Labor Protests As early as the 1820s, factory workers tried to gain more power against employers by using the technique of **collective bargaining**, or negotiating as a group for higher wages or better working conditions. One form of collective bargaining was the strike, in which workers agreed to cease work until certain demands were met. Some strikes were local, but often they involved workers in a whole industry across a state, a region, or the country.

The first national labor union was founded in 1834 as the National Trades Union, open to workers from all trades. It lasted only a few years, and no new unions formed in the wake of the depressions of the late 1830s. However, local strikes succeeded in reducing the factory workday in some regions. The 10-hour workday became the standard in most New England factories. Gradually, national unions began to reappear.

Socialism Spreads In the 1830s, a movement called **socialism** spread throughout Europe. Socialism is an economic and political philosophy that favors public, instead of private, control of property and income. Socialists believe that society at large, not just private individuals, should take charge of a nation's wealth. That wealth, they argue, should be distributed equally to everyone.

In 1848, the German philosophers Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels expanded on the ideas of socialism in a treatise titled *Communist Manifesto*. This pamphlet denounced capitalism and predicted that workers would overturn it. Most Americans rejected these ideas, believing that they threatened the American ideals of free enterprise, private property, and individual liberty. The wealthy in particular opposed socialism because it threatened their fortunes. But many labor activists borrowed ideas from socialism to support their goals for social reform.

Founding the Knights of Labor In 1869, Uriah Smith Stephens founded a labor union called the **Knights of Labor**. Stephens, a tailor who had lived and worked around the country, included all workers of any trade, skilled or unskilled, in his union. The Knights also actively recruited African Americans. Under Stephens, the union functioned largely as a secret society, devoted to broad social reform such as replacing capitalism with workers' cooperatives. The Preamble to the Knights' Constitution, written in 1878, read:

Primary Source “The recent alarming development and aggression of aggregated wealth, which, unless checked, will inevitably lead to the pauperization and hopeless degradation of the toiling masses, render it imperative, if we desire to enjoy the blessings of life, that a check should be placed upon its power . . . and a system adopted which will secure to the laborer the fruits of his toil . . .”

In 1881, **Terence V. Powderly** took on the leadership of the Knights. The son of Irish immigrants, Powderly had worked in a menial job on the railroad before rising to become mayor of Scranton, Pennsylvania, in the 1870s. He continued to pursue ideological reforms meant to lead workers out of the bondage of wage labor. He encouraged boycotts and negotiation with employers, but he abandoned the secretive nature of the union. By 1885, the Knights had grown to include some 700,000 men and women nationwide, of every race and ethnicity. By the 1890s, however, after a series of failed strikes, the Knights had largely disappeared.

Showing Loyalty

Early unions promoted loyalty—and spread recognition—by printing their names and locations on ribbons, buttons, and posters. *Do you think employers allowed workers to display such items at work? Explain.*



Forming the AFL In 1886, **Samuel Gompers** formed the **American Federation of Labor (AFL)**. Gompers was a poor English immigrant who had worked his way up to head the local cigarmakers' union in New York. While the Knights of Labor were made up of all workers, the AFL was a craft union, a loose organization of skilled workers from some 100 local unions devoted to specific crafts or trades. These local unions retained their individuality but gained strength in bargaining through their affiliation with the AFL.

Gompers set high dues for membership in the AFL, pooling the money to create a strike and pension fund to assist workers in need. Unlike the Knights of Labor, the AFL did not aim for larger social gains for workers. Instead, it focused on very specific workers' issues such as wages, working hours, and working conditions. The AFL also pressed for workplaces in which only union members could be hired. Because of its narrow focus on workers' issues, the AFL was often called a "bread and butter" union.

The AFL was not as successful as the Knights in gaining membership, partly because of its own policies. It opposed women members, because Gompers believed their presence in the workplace would drive wages down. While it was theoretically open to African Americans, local branches usually found ways to exclude them.

✓ **Checkpoint** How did various labor unions differ in their goals?

Strikes Rock the Nation

As membership in labor unions rose and labor activists became more skilled in organizing large-scale protests, a wave of bitter confrontations between labor and management hit the nation. The first major strike occurred in the railroad industry in 1877. Striking workers, responding to wage cuts, caused massive property destruction in several cities. State militias were called in to protect strikebreakers, or temporary workers hired to perform the jobs of striking workers. Finally, the federal government sent in troops to restore order. In the decades to follow, similar labor disputes would affect businesses, the government, and the organization of labor unions themselves.

Violence Erupts in Haymarket Square On May 1, 1886, thousands of workers mounted a national demonstration for an eight-hour workday. Strikes erupted in several cities, and fights broke out between strikers and strikebreakers. Conflict then escalated between strikers and police who were brought in to halt the violence. On May 4, protesters gathered at Haymarket Square in Chicago. The diverse crowd included anarchists, or radicals opposed to all government. A frenzy broke out when a protester threw a bomb, killing a policeman. Dozens of people, both protesters and policemen, were killed. Eight anarchists were tried

Major Strikes of the Late 1800s

✓ **Quick Study**

Strike	Cause	Effect
Railroad strikes, 1877	Response to cuts in workers' wages	Set the scene for violent strikes to come
Haymarket Square, 1886	Part of a campaign to achieve an eight-hour workday	Americans became wary of labor unions; the Knights of Labor were blamed for the riot and membership declined.
Homestead Strike, 1892	Economic depression led to cuts in steelworkers' wages	After losing the standoff, steelworker unions lost power throughout the country.
Pullman Strike, 1893	Wages cut without a decrease in the cost of living in the company town	Employers used the courts to limit the influence of unions.

Analyzing Political Cartoons



A Different Kind of Knight This cartoon appeared around 1886, at a time when people were vigorously debating the role of labor unions.

- A** The cartoon appeared in *Puck*, a magazine that used humor and satire to explore social and political issues.
- B** The banner is the title of the cartoon, "Knights of the Nineteenth Century."
- C** The cooper wears a huge, bloated barrel.
- D** The plumber carries his bank book filled with profits made from the heavy bills he charges for his services.

1. What two meanings does the title of the cartoon convey?
2. How does the cartoonist's treatment of the cooper and the plumber suggest that their actions are not "knightly"?

for murder, and four were executed. The governor of Illinois, deciding that evidence for the convictions had been scanty, pardoned three of the others. The fourth had already committed suicide in jail.

The **Haymarket Riot** left an unfortunate legacy. The Knights of Labor fizzled out as people shied away from radicalism. Employers became even more suspicious of union activities, associating them with violence. In general, much of the American public at that time came to share that view.

Steelworkers Strike at Homestead In the summer of 1892, a Carnegie Steel plant in Homestead, Pennsylvania, cut workers' wages. The union immediately called a strike. Andrew Carnegie's partner, Henry Frick, responded by bringing in the Pinkertons, a private police force known for their ability to break up strikes. The Pinkertons killed several strikers and wounded many others in a standoff that lasted some two weeks. Then, on July 23, an anarchist who had joined the protesters tried to assassinate Frick. The union had not backed his plan, but the public associated the two. Recognizing that public opinion was turning against unions, the union called off the strike in November. The **Homestead Strike** was part of an epidemic of steelworkers' and miners' strikes that took place as economic depression spread across America. In each case, troops and local militia were called in to suppress the unrest.

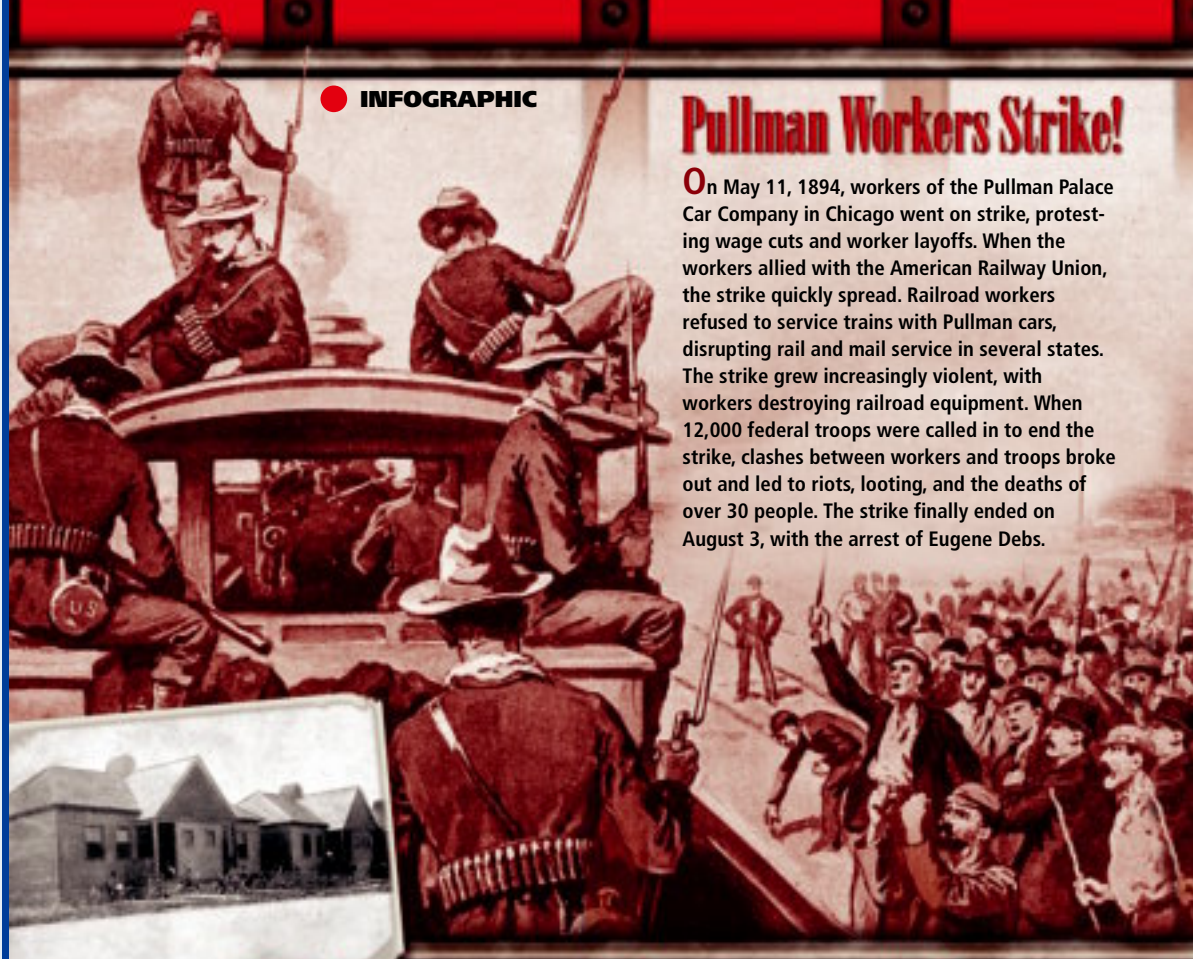
Workers Strike Against Pullman In 1893, the Pullman Palace Car Company, which produced luxury railroad cars, laid off workers and reduced wages by 25 percent. Inventor George Pullman, who owned the company, required workers to live in the company town near Chicago and controlled their rents and the prices of goods. In May of 1894, workers sent a delegation to negotiate with Pullman. He responded by firing three workers and shutting down the plant.

Desperate, the workers turned to the American Railway Union (A.R.U.), led by **Eugene V. Debs**. Debs had begun work in a low-level railroad job while still a teenager, working his way up. He had condemned the railroad strike of 1877, which he said was a result of disorganization and corruption within the unions.

● INFOGRAPHIC

Pullman Workers Strike!

On May 11, 1894, workers of the Pullman Palace Car Company in Chicago went on strike, protesting wage cuts and worker layoffs. When the workers allied with the American Railway Union, the strike quickly spread. Railroad workers refused to service trains with Pullman cars, disrupting rail and mail service in several states. The strike grew increasingly violent, with workers destroying railroad equipment. When 12,000 federal troops were called in to end the strike, clashes between workers and troops broke out and led to riots, looting, and the deaths of over 30 people. The strike finally ended on August 3, with the arrest of Eugene Debs.



The Company Town

Pullman intended his clean, neat company town to protect workers from immoral influences—and to make a favorable impression on visitors. Life inside the town presented a different picture. Pullman owned the housing, stores, and churches, and charged steep rents for them all. Despite cutting wages several times, he never reduced rents or prices of goods. As a result, Pullman workers went further and further into debt.

After a deduction for rent, a worker's paycheck in the late 1800s totaled two cents (about forty cents in today's dollars). After the strike a worker testified that "I have seen men with families of eight or nine children crying because they got only three or four cents after paying their rent."



The Main Players

▶ George Pullman amassed a fortune in the railroad car business. A government investigation of the strike blamed Pullman and ruined his reputation.

Experienced labor leader and ARU head

▶ Eugene Debs spent six months in jail, where he read about European labor unions and became a Socialist.



Thinking Critically

- 1. Distinguishing Fact From Opinion** A Pullman worker described life in the company town as "slavery worse than that of Negroes of the South." Is this factually accurate?
- 2. Predict Consequences** How might the Pullman Strike have been avoided?

Debs organized the A.R.U. as an industrial union, grouping all railroad workers together rather than separating them by the job they held. He believed that industrial unions allowed groups to exert united pressure on employers.

The A.R.U. called for a nationwide strike. By June of 1894, nearly 300,000 railworkers had walked off their jobs. The **Pullman Strike** escalated, halting both railroad traffic and mail delivery. Railroad owners cited the Sherman Antitrust Act in its argument that the union was illegally disrupting free trade. On July 4, President Grover Cleveland sent in federal troops, ending the strike. When he refused the government's order to end the strike, Debs was imprisoned for conspiring against interstate commerce. Though Debs appealed the conviction, claiming that the government had no authority to halt the strike, the Supreme Court upheld it in the case *In re Debs* in 1895.

Effects on the Labor Movement The outcome of the Pullman Strike set an important trend. Employers appealed frequently for court orders against unions, citing legislation like the Sherman Antitrust Act. The federal government regularly approved these appeals, denying unions recognition as legally protected organizations and limiting union gains for more than 30 years. As the twentieth century opened, industrialists, workers, and government agencies lashed out at one another over numerous labor issues. Contract negotiations, strikes, and legislation would become the way of life for American industry.

In the decades after Pullman, the labor movement split into different factions, some increasingly influenced by socialism. By the end of the 1800s, Debs had become a Socialist. He helped organize the American Socialist Party in 1897, running for President in 1900. In 1905, he helped found the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), or Wobblies. The IWW was a radical union of unskilled workers with many Socialists among its leaders. In the first few decades of the 1900s, the IWW led a number of strikes, many of them violent.

✓ **Checkpoint** Why did workers increasingly turn to the strike as a tactic to win labor gains?

Vocabulary Builder

trend—(trehnd) *n.* general course of events

SECTION

3 Assessment

Progress Monitoring Online

For: Self-test with vocabulary practice
Web Code: nca-1331

Comprehension

1. Terms and People For each item below, write a sentence explaining how it relates to the growing labor movement in the late 1800s.

- sweatshop
- company town
- collective bargaining
- socialism
- Knights of Labor
- Terence V. Powderly
- Samuel Gompers
- AFL
- Haymarket Riot
- Homestead Strike
- Eugene V. Debs
- Pullman Strike

2. NoteTaking Reading Skill:

Identify Main Ideas Use your completed concept web to answer the Section Focus Question: How did the rise of labor unions shape relations among workers, big business, and government?

Writing About History

3. Quick Write: Organize Information Suppose you are a labor organizer writing a memo to union members proposing a strike. Decide on the kind of information you want to present in the main body of your memo. List the information you will cover and note what format it will be in, for example, bulleted lists, charts, and so on.

Critical Thinking

- 4. Recognize Ideologies** What does the prevalence of child labor in the 1800s tell you about how society viewed children at the time?
- 5. Identify Central Issues** Why were employers generally opposed to labor unions?
- 6. Recognize Cause and Effect** Why did the major strikes of the late 1800s lead to a backlash against labor unions?