

Rise and decline of unions in american society history essay



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Labor unions have served as a defining factor to American society for almost 150 years. They had their rise to power, their peak, and currently their decline of power. At the beginning of their rise they served as an incredibly useful movement to end the horrible working conditions of the day and the terrible pay. Now however they are deemed by many to be large, cumbersome, and driving out American industry. This paper will discuss the history, social, and economic impacts, good and bad, of labor unions throughout American history. The overall point of the paper is to chart the quick and strong rise of labor unions and their slow but steady decline.

To fully understand the American labor union, you must first know about their history. American labor unions consisted of immigrants from Europe who had been part of the trade unions. These early labor unions consisted of skilled artisans, not the factory workers we associate them with now.

Unfortunately for these artisans America was not a very accepting place to them. Most colonial Americans were farmers or plantation owners and most of them had no need for organized labor. It also didn't help that many of these unions were run almost like gangs often using violence and coercion to meet their needs. Some early unions acted as secret societies. Members had to swear secret oaths. Needless to say the law did not take kindly to these sometimes illegal activities[1].

During the revolution the labor unions seemed to take a little hold. The war effort seemed to unite the working class a bit more. This and Adam Smith's new economic ideology of free trade were openly embraced by the labor unions of the day. There were also instances of workers trying to strike.

These attempts seemed to have had worked to a degree[2].

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In early post-revolution America labor unions still really didn't take hold, especially not in the European fashion. These early legitimate labor unions or guilds were few but none the less took hold in some of the major cities. These guilds consisted of carpenters, shoemakers, tailors, and hat makers. As you can see early labor unions were not that of unskilled labor but of skilled workers and artisans. These early unions did not plan the work strikes it was all spontaneous oftentimes leading to mixed results. The first ever recorded strike in America's history was led by printers and shoemakers in Philadelphia in 1786. They struck on the opposition of a wage cut and also demanded a wage increase. And while the wage cuts were foiled, wage increases were ultimately a failure. Employers would soon learn that the laborers would always win the shorter strikes and they could win the longer strikes. It turned out that Philadelphia was and would become an even more crucial location in labor union history. It was the site for not only the first labor strike, but the first pro-labor newspaper, the first real organized body of labor unions, and, probably most importantly the first labor political activity[3].

By the early to mid 19th century unions had not only increased in number but they had heavily refined their tactics. Before they were nothing more than mob violence but now they had gotten down their bargaining to a science. These hatchling labor unions sought full control of local labor and pressured workshops into becoming closed shops. These closed shops not only heavily restricted hiring which also somewhat suffocated the supply of artisans. By doing this labor unions were able increase wages. The labor unions of the past were far different than the ones we know today. They

used to be far more subtle but yet still blunt. Now it is mostly bargaining and written contracts that get unions their advances. While labor unions were largely a success to the people, the law had an incredibly hard time with their legal status. At first they were considered criminal conspiracies bent on fixing prices. In fact a few major state court cases proved this. In 1806 during the criminal court case of Commonwealth vs. Pullis, eight Philadelphian shoemakers were convicted guilty of fixing prices and were fined a hefty sum of \$8. Despite the long three day case, this case yielded only eighteen more conspirators during its life. More than a quarter century later in 1842, labor unions caught a break. The Massachusetts Supreme Court decided that shoemakers did have a legal right to organize and hold strikes. They did however condone the use of violence as tool of union strikes[4].

The mid to late 1800's were a time where every ideology was tried. This fact and the rise of industrialization led to a mushrooming of labor union power. During and after the Civil war the United States would become the world's leading industrial power. But with the increased machinery came increased dangers. It is also in this era where actual non skilled labor took over the trade unions. There were labor movements that demanded a political revolution of the working class and other more practical ones that wanted more material gains for their members. These more practical ones would gain the most public support and last the longest out of them all. The first real major labor union was the National Labor Union, formed in 1866. Their claim to fame was that they lobbied Congress to pass a bill to limit federal workers to eight hour days. Later the Knights of Labor were formed in 1869. Under the leadership of Terrance Powderly the power of this union swelled.

This union was different because it accepted both skilled and unskilled workers, black and white. Because of this it reached a membership of 750,000 at its height. Unfortunately there were huge divisions between the skilled and unskilled workers. The skilled workers resented the fact that unskilled workers wanted increased labor movements for their own betterment. They would start to decline because of infamous Haymarket Square riots. Bad press and an increasingly negative public opinion would shut down any further efforts of the Knights of Labor[5]. A smaller but longer lasting labor union movement would emerge in 1881. It was called the American Federation of Labor or AFL and was led by Samuel Gompers. The federation was founded on the idea that organized labor needed to be well more organized. They were extremely efficient at organizing strikes and represented more of the skilled labor section. They didn't want skilled labor to be reduced to simple line factory workers[6]. Toward the end of the century a crushing blow was dealt to labor unions everywhere. In 1842 labor union were finally recognized as legitimate groups instead of criminal conspiracies. In 1894 the Pullman Strike struck Chicago. The American Railroad Union led by Eugene V. Debs began their strike because of bad wages and terrible working conditions, and demanded a boycott on Pullman trains. Within a week 125,000 railroads workers joined in. About another week later President Cleveland sent in federal troops and the strike was forcefully put down. Many of the railroad workers were blacklisted[7].

A more labor friendly era would emerge with the entrance of the 20th century. It would be called the Progressive Era. In 1902, 100,000 miners associated with the United Mine Workers went on strike in northern

Pennsylvania because of horrendous working conditions. It started May, 12 and lasted the entire summer. Because of a starting economic decline President Theodore Roosevelt intervened that fall. After he appointed mediators the miners went back to work. The workers were given half of what they wanted. They were given a ten percent pay increase and their working hours were cut back. Unfortunately the union did not receive formal recognition for the work they did. In 1911 a tragedy struck the Triangle Shirtwaist Co. factory in New York. Because of the suffocating small work conditions and an extremely hot workplace, the factory caught fire. Everything would have been alright had the foreman not blocked off the fire exits because of fear of the women taking breaks. Women were seen throwing themselves out of the windows to spare themselves from burning alive in the inferno. About 150 died that day and it aroused massive amounts of public support. This only helped the union's plight and union power increased significantly[8]. In 1912 Congress passed the Lloyd-Lafollette Act. It allowed collective bargaining to government postal workers and even went so far as to encourage it. Also in 1912 was the famous union struggle in the textile mills of Lawrence Massachusetts. Here the extreme left labor union known as the Industrial Workers of the World struck because of pay cuts with a backing of 50,000 workers. The public's opinion shifted in favor when the police attacked a group of women and children. After that incident the pay cut was stopped. A while later, with the backing of the AFL, an US Department of Labor was created as well as a Children's Bureau[9]. In 1914 Congress passed another pro-union law, the Clayton Act. It exempted unions from being persecuted as monopolies under the Sherman Anti-Trust Act. It also limited the courts power to break up strikes. Because of this Progressive

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Era union membership was about 2.7 million in 1913 and membership consisted of six to seven percent of the total working population[10].

Industry during World War I needed specialties in certain industries. Unions could provide these specialties and they flourished. This good relationship between the federal government and the labor unions would spawn much new pro-union legislation later on. During World War I union membership shot up five percent resulting in a total membership of twelve percent of the working population. During the war the federal government even created a union. It was called the Loyal Legion of Loggers and Lumberman. It was created to fight the extreme left Industrial Workers of the World by making lumberjacks to join. Even with its tremendous government support it still failed shortly after the war. Federal committees such as the War Labor Board and the War Labor Policies Board helped establish more power to the workers as a whole, union or not[11].

With the end of WWI the Roaring Twenties was brought in. And while roaring and exciting for the rich it was a hard time for unions and workers as a whole. As employment steadily rose, union membership fell and in 1924 it hit only eight percent[12]. New anti-union groups and the increase of open shops gave way to a decrease in popular support. This and the first Red Scare severely stunted the seemingly strong growth of American Labor Unions[13]. A break came to the corporate unions in 1926. Known as the Railway Labor Act it gave collective bargaining to all railway labor disputes and set up some government control on private sector labor unions disputes[14].

During the 1930's up to the Second World War our country was in the worst economic shape it had ever been. Known as the Great Depression, one in four people didn't have a job and the power of labor unions shot up like it had never done before[15]. During Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration a large amount of pro-labor bills were passed. First was the Davis- Bacon bill of 1931. It was created to help local construction workers and businesses from being overwhelmed by outside competition. The next was the NIRA in 1933 which gave a huge amount of power to the President. The Supreme Court would rule this law unconstitutional two years later in the Schechter Poultry case. The National Labor Relations Act of 1935 stands as one of the labor unions greatest achievements. All labor unions were given the power of collective bargaining with the federal government and it gave workers the right to negotiate with employers without the risk of being fired. Eventually the public would become upset with the increasingly adversarial nature of the unions and amendments were made. The Public Contract Act of 1936 was created to help labor unions like the Davis-Bacon helped the construction Union. It however was largely ineffective. The last and probably the labor unions most important bill was the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938. This bill established a national minimum wage at twenty five cents per hour[16]. Earlier in 1935 the Committee for Labor Organization was created. It created industrial unions which are unions composed of all workers of an industry regardless of whether they are skilled or unskilled. This new breed of union was headed by members of the AFL and it got rid of most of the internal strife the different unions had[17].

During World War II sixteen million soldiers served the United States, draftees and nondraftees. This created a shortage of labor and unions were quick to step in and provide it. In 1942, President Roosevelt created the National War Labor Board which solved labor disputes with mediation[18]. Overall WWII was a good era for labor unions, full of fair prices and rising working conditions.

After WWII, labor unions' power started to decline. Not only was anti-union legislation passed but the public's support started to decline heavily. After WWII ended, labor unions went on strike in many fronts. Such as steel and coal, these strikes badly damaged the US economy and further decreased public opinions. It started in 1947 with the passing of the Taft- Hartley Act. It amended the National Labor relations act. It put up restrictions on labor actions that seemed unfair. It outlawed closed shops and set up " right-to-work" laws. These enable a state to choose whether they wanted to ban some union security measures. Most of the Deep South and Midwest states are right-to-work states. In response to these new policies the AFL and CIO merge so that they aren't plagued by petty differences and so they didn't have to compete for members[19]. For the rest of the 1950s labor and government were on decent terms. The 1960s would turn out to be a hard time for labor unions. The rapid increase of the middle class along with the movement of industry to the non- union South hurt unions. Also the rampant amount of corruption in the International Brotherhood of Teamsters further soiled labor union's reputations as a whole. Union membership decreased substantially and the increase of labor lobbying hurt the civil rights movements. In the 70's and 80's an increase in minority poverty and the

increase of women in the workforce further hurt labor tensions with the public[20]. In 1981 a large strike by the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization was held. Ronald Reagan ordered them stop and return to work immediately otherwise they would be fired. They ignored this warning and a few days later were all fired. Over eleven thousand people were fired and blacklisted for the rest of their lives[21].

And even today the power of the once great labor unions is still falling. Since 1998 millions of previously American manufacturing jobs have been lost to low cost imports by countries like China and Indonesia[22]. This moving of American jobs was caused in part by the now ridiculous wages that basic day laborers are paid. Even today you can see the footholds labor unions have lost. Wisconsin has recently passed a law that has stripped labor unions of almost all their power. Recent judicial elections have however shown the populaces disagreements of this law. There has been a recently proposed law in Ohio that will do almost the exact same thing as that in Wisconsin.

Labor unions have had far and reaching impacts on our economy, some good and some bad. Wasn't the original purpose of a union to have workers unite to better themselves financially? Unions act as labor cartels. They restrict the amount of labor and membership in an industry and in turn the lack of labor drives up wages. This seems unfair in a system of free enterprise and equal opportunity. It is true that union workers tend to be paid more than non-union but these numbers do not show the real truth. In the North where unions are prevalent and wages tend to be higher. But the cost of living is higher compared to the Deep South where the cost of living is comparably smaller.

So does this increased wage really make a difference? Unions do hurt business
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as a whole they decrease investment which in turn stunts the company's growth. According to unions, wage increases in an already stunted business will help both the workers and the business. Unions also, like previously said, decrease jobs. With our struggling economy and manufacturing job being outsourced to foreign markets everyday unions are not helping the situation by regulating workers population. With globalization rapidly increasing non-union manufacturing workers have fared far better than union ones. Since 2000, thirty eight percent of union manufacturing workers compared to the eighteen percent of non-union workers. Because of the union workers places like the North, which used to be the manufacturing hub of the world, is drying up. The steel and car factories which were the life blood of many small and large communities alike are shutting down. But in the South manufacturing is on a rise. Many of the foreign car and other industries are investing heavily into plants in the south[23].

To conclude, labor unions are a piece of the American experience. They will continue to be for good or worse. They were created for the purest of reasons but I believe that they have strayed from this path. And until it is readjusted, I believe union power should be curbed. This essay described the history of labor unions as well as a contemporary economic view.