

The failures of progressivism, 1900- 20 essay examples

[Politics](#), [Civil Rights](#)



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ABSTRACT

In the years 1870 to 1900 the U. S. had become the leading industrial power in the world, with more railroad mileage and a larger steel industry than the rest of the world combined. As it became an urban, industrial society with a rapidly growing population and millions of immigrants, it faced new social and economic problems, which were addressed by an expanding government at all levels. In the Progressive Era of 1900-20, some limited gains were made in the regulation of capitalism, as well as granting voting rights to women, passing constitutional amendments for an income tax and the direct election of senators, but most important reforms on behalf of workers, organized labor, blacks and other minorities, and the creation of a national welfare state did not occur until future reform waves in the 1930s and 1960s.

Millions of immigrants entered the United States during this period, increasingly from Southern and Eastern Europe after 1890, and formed much of the unskilled, lowly-paid labor force in the mining, iron and steel and automobile industries, and were increasingly joined by blacks and poor whites from the South, escaping from sharecropping, tenancy and the horrendous economic conditions in agriculture there. In general, though, labor unions like the American Federation of Labor (AFL) were only open to skilled, native born white men. One important exception to this rule, however, was the radical International Workers of the World (IWW) which was also suppressed during World War I when its leaders went to prison for opposing the war. Samuel Gompers, head of the AFL, supported the war, and was rewarded by a federal policy that permitted collective bargaining in

industry for the first time. This policy was reversed once the war ended, leading to massive strikes in 1919, which in cities like Seattle sometimes developed into full-fledged general strikes, but these were also violently suppressed.

One example of Progressive failure to deal with labor and the rights of the working class was in one of the bloodiest and most prolonged strikes in U. S. labor history that occurred at Ludlow, Colorado in 1913-14. In this strike 10-12, 000 miners employed by the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company (CFIC) demanded a 10% pay raise, the right to trade outside of company stores and recognition of the United Mine Workers Union. These mines were also among the most dangerous in the country, with a death rate over double the national average, but relatives of those killed in the mines almost never received compensation from the local courts. Indeed, the judges, sheriffs and county officials were all under the control of the company, while over 60% of the workers were immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe (Wallace 2003). CCFI, which was owned by the Rockefeller family, fired the miners immediately, evicted them from the company towns and brought in strikebreakers protected by the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency. This organization began a reign of terror against the strikers, who were now living in tent colonies near the mines, and murders, beatings and lynching became common. At Ludlow, the colony had about 200 tents and 1, 200 strikers and their families, who were regularly attacked by rifle and machine gun fire and even an armored car owned by CFIC (Wallace 2003). Although the strike dragged on until December 1914, the miners were ultimately defeated, but the negative publicity against the Rockefeller family was so great that they

hired a public relations expert, Ivy Lee, to repair their public image. He also suggested that the family set up a non-profit foundation to but public goodwill.

On the issue of black civil rights, despite the obvious problems of lynching, segregation and disenfranchisement, very little change occurred in the Progressive Era. Booker T. Washington was willing to accommodate to social and political inequality for blacks in favor of a policy of gradualism and improvement through education and economic status, while W. E. B. DuBois insisted on full civil, political and economic equality for blacks. As Washington informed the white audience at the Atlanta Exposition in 1895, blacks should be willing to forgo opposition to segregation or demands for civil rights and voting rights in favor of education, training and advancement in the commercial world (Woodward 1955/2002). His own Tuskegee Institute was the model for his version of industrial and agricultural training for blacks, and despite the fact that most of them were still sharecroppers and tenant farmers, denied work in industry, the professions and government, that the South offered more commercial opportunities than any other region of the country. He went on to reassure his listeners that blacks had no desire for social and political equality and “ you can be sure in the future, as in the past, that you and your families will be surrounded by the most patient, faithful, law-abiding, and unresentful people that the world has seen” (Washington 1895). Washington was therefore quite willing to abandon any further attempts at Reconstruction in the South, which had already been replaced by a system of Jim Crow segregation and loss of voting rights.

DuBois argued that Washington’s accommodation to the racist system of the

South was morally and politically wrong, and asserted that the Radical Reconstruction period from 1867-77 had been the greatest period of black progress in American history up to that time. He strongly and publicly opposed the system of segregation and denial of black voting rights that was upheld by Supreme Court decisions like *Plessey v. Ferguson* (1896) and *Williams v. Mississippi* (1897). Within two years after Washington's Atlanta Exposition address, the highest court in the land had upheld state and local laws that segregated blacks, denied them equal education and access to public facilities, and eliminated their right to vote (Saccturo 2000). Separate but equal was the law of the land in many parts of the country until 1964, and while the separation by race was real, equality never existed. For this reason, DuBois became one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909 and edited its newspaper *The Crisis* for many years. Progress toward civil rights and full equality was slow, however, and very little changed in the Progressive Era. Although many Progressives were either socialists or sympathetic to socialistic ideas, the Socialist Party did not become one of the two major parties as other democratic countries, although it came closer in this era than it ever would again. Eugene Debs became a socialist after he was imprisoned because of his role in the Pullman Strike, and ran for president five times in 1900-20, receiving over one-million votes running against Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt. This was actually the high point of socialism in the U. S. since the party was suppressed again due to its opposition to the First World War, and Debs was jailed again in 1918. Progressives and New Dealers borrowed part of the socialist platform,

however, including old-age pensions, national health care, public housing, women's suffrage and an income tax but not its broad-reaching plans to nationalize American industry and finance. In the end, Progressivism adopted just enough of the social democratic policies to forestall even more radical alternatives on the Left, during an era when discontent among labor, small farmers and even many middle class reformers was running very high in the United States.

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