

The success of organized labor

[Business](#), [Employment](#)



The Success of Organized Labor in Improving Working Conditions in the Late 19th Century The late 19th century was a time of great change in America, a time of rapid industrialization and great improvements in the quality of life for the majority of people. The industrialization that occurred however led to a large working class who began to feel oppressed by the capital interests; this led to the formation of unions and banding together of workers for mutual benefit.

Despite this, organized labor was largely unsuccessful in securing improved positions for workers in the late 19th century, however they were marginally successful at first in forcing the employers to make considerations for their workers, if not accept all demands directly. Organized labor was a relatively new phenomenon in the late 1800's: it arose out of the massive industrialization of the time and the growth of a working class.

However as with most new movements, labor did not achieve nearly any of its popular goals. Capital squashed labor during this period through various means, but especially through government intervention, evidenced by the except from In re Debs, from the US supreme court “[F]or it has always been recognized as one of the powers and duties of government to remove obstructions from the highway under its control... This doctrine of the government removing the obstructions to business from the 'highway of commerce' using federal and state troops was backed by legislation that was originally intended to weaken trusts (specifically the Sherman anti-trust act) led to the quick and merciless end of many strikes including the Great Railroad Strike of 1877 and eventually the homestead steel strike.

Samuel Gompers protested this intervention to a House commission by stating: (in regards to greater profits) “ Unless [the workers] occasionally strike, or have the power to enter upon a strike, the improvements will all go to the employer... ”. The industrialists also used private para-military detectives to protect their plants and break strikes. This escalated the violence and led to the deaths of many workers; according to the Corner's list of people killed, two of the eleven were detectives and the other nine were workers.

Pointing to the uneven match between the opposing parties in strength and the reasons why the strike was eventually broken. The Capitalists also used contracts such as the Western Union Telegraph employee contract, known as yellow-dog contracts, to prevent workers from joining unions. These contracts forced any employee either accept the terms of employment or leave the position, conditions which ensured the workers had little power to resist or petition for changes in their working environment.

While labor had nearly no success in achieving their stated goals they did manage to get minor attention from their employers and the public. The capitalists steadily increased wages from their larger profits and eventually began to reduce the hours worked by their employees, according to the Historical Statistics of the United States table. The drop in hours worked and the steady rise in wages coincide with both the affects of the founding of the AFL in 1881 and continued acts of striking, such as the Great Railway Strike of 1877.

The Railway strike of 1877, while unsuccessful, “ Showed that those who were engaged in it[were not only bold and determined. But that they [had]

the the sympathy of a large part of the community in which they lived.” (New York Times, 7-18-1877). Many other low income workers for industrialists were sympathetic to the cause of the railroad employees and the St. Louis Workingman's party even went so far as to send 500 of its members over the river in a show of support for the strikers in St. Louis.

This sympathy however was squandered by labor when they could not represent a cohesive set of goals to the public's assessment (illustrated by the cartoon captioned: Too many cooks spoil the broth). The conflicting goals of the separate organizations and their familiars, sometimes including anarchists, led to incidents such as the Haymarket riots, where a peaceful protest devolved into a violent and bloody uprising and frightened the public. The literate middle classes reading about this news likely felt like labor was attempting to “ kill the goose that laid the golden egg” (as shown by Thomas Nast's cartoon).

The 'golden egg' which had allowed the middle class the leisure time to even read papers in the beginning. The 'golden egg' that led to a system of work, where “ 100 men are able to do now what it took 300 or 400 men to do fifteen years ago. ” This boom in productivity led to much greater material wealth for everyone in the country and increased the standard of living. The backlash of this sway in public opinion led to the destruction of the Knights of Labor and the the virtual end of the power of all labor organizations and unions for years to come.

This is why organized labor failed to radically change the outlook of the average factory worker; they alienated the public from their cause through the extreme actions of branches of the movement. They pushed for a piece

of the vast treasures that the industrialists had created that they simply did not deserve. They did not succeed in accomplishing their goals such as the eight hour work day through violent strikes and protests, they succeeded only in gaining minor attention from their employers and the public. ions
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