

Reform attempts of farmers and workers

[Business](#), [Industries](#)



Life in the late nineteenth and in the early twentieth century in the United States was rough for the average person because of the poor conditions and inability to get ahead of debts and poverty. Two major groups that suffered the most were labor workers and farmers. For the workers in factories, the industrial expansion of the nation brought many changes to the workplace. These changes made life as a labor worker more dangerous and less profitable. Farmers also faced many problems such as high railroad rates and high loan interest rates.

Both groups searched for ways to band together with people in similar situations to help resolve some of the problems. After many failing attempts, a movement called Progressivism caused many changes and greatly improved life for farmers, labor workers, and many other groups of the early 20th century. In the late nineteenth century, people flooded to cities to fill the positions of factory workers. Some of the people were farmers who had grown tired of constant debt and looked to the city for economic gain. Others were immigrants from other countries who left their homeland behind to find a better life.

Many of these people had nowhere to go, so they followed their first instinct and moved to the cities to find work. This flood of people caused a huge surplus of labor workers, thus resulting in unsafe work conditions and low wages for those with jobs. The dawn of the factory reduced the need for skilled workers, making the tasks easy enough for a small child to perform. With this idea, factory owners hired women and children to operate their machines and paid them even less than the underpaid men. Obviously these

people could not live like this, so they began to form unions in an attempt to fix some of the problems in the work place.

The first major attempt at a large union to crack down on some of the problems which faced workers was The Knights of Labor. Membership was open to a very wide range including almost all workers and women. Their leaders fought for a shorter workday and removal of children from the workplace. A second attempt called the American Federation of Labor restricted membership to skilled workers. Their goals were to improve wages, numbers of hours in a workday, and working conditions. One of the most famous strikes was the Pullman Strike which involved the American Railway Union and Pullman Company workers.

It was sparked by a twenty-five percent wage cut to employees. This strike consisting of a few thousand workers caused a halt in trains from Chicago to the west coast. These responses to the problems of the workplace not only expressed their discontent, but also forced their employers into changes in administration. A second group that had large problems in the early 20th century were farm owners. One major problem was the rates charged by the railroad to farmers. Since farmers depended so greatly on the railroad, railroad companies could charge almost whatever they wanted.

The result was widespread debt and poverty for farmers. Other uncontrollable factors such as bad weather and overproduction hurt farming as well. The first major attempt to organize to urge changes in the nation was called the Nation Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry. This organization attempted to teach smaller farmers techniques to make their fields more

productive. After farm prices plummeted as result of a depression, the organization began to work politically to help control farm prices. As result many states placed strict restrictions on railroads to regulate rates and operations.

The courts put a stop to the legislation and sent the railroad prices back up. The second attempt was the farmers alliance which setup stores and other facilities for their fellow farming members to use. This partially removed the 'middleman' from stealing a portion of the profits. Although this was more widespread than the Grange, the system was too strong to allow these alliance groups. A movement known as Populism, which urged changes to aid farmers, formed. Many of the views of the populist movement were adopted by the more popular and successful reform movement known as Progressivism.

In the early years of the 20th century, a powerful reform movement called Progressivism swept the country. Its leaders were college professors, ministers, journalists, physicians and social workers. Their goal was to improve conditions for all Americans. They wanted to make the political system more egalitarian. They also wanted to make the nation's economic system more democratic. They felt that the people who owned the nations resources, should share some of their wealth with the less fortunate. The movement appealed to farmers, small businessmen, women and laborers.

They were alarmed by the growing use of court rulings to halt strikes. In 1890, for example, Congress passed the Sherman Antitrust Act. Its purpose was to punish big business corporations that combined to prevent

competition. Yet more and more it was being used as a weapon against unions. The Progressives were unhappy about the use of federal troops and state militia against strikers. They were outraged by inhuman conditions in factories and mines. The Progressives and the AFL pressured state governments for laws to protect wage earners. Almost all states passed laws forbidding the employment of children under 14 years old.

Many states also set a lower maximum work week for their employees. One program designed to help farmers and labor workers was the ICC or Interstate Commerce Commission, which struck down on railroad companies and their unfair practices. This greatly helped farmers earn the proper wages for their crops. Today, despite the decline in members, organized labor in the United States remains strong and conditions of America's labor force have steadily improved. The length of the work day has been shortened. Many agreements between employers and wage earners now call for less than 40 hours of work a week.

Most agreements have generous " fringe" benefits. These include insurance, pensions and healthcare plans. As the number of union members has decreased as a percentage of the total work force, unions have responded by broadening their organizing efforts to include employees of federal, state and local governments as well as other professionals. Organizers have also waged long campaigns to unionize and win better conditions for such diverse groups as public school teachers and seasonal farm workers. As the work force has changed, so have some of the labor-management issues.

Unions now want laws to strengthen their right to strike by prohibiting companies from hiring permanent replacements for striking workers.

Employers want the right to test workers for drug use. Many workers are fighting for the right to take unpaid leave when they have babies or when a family member is ill and needs extensive care. And, as the unemployment rate has climbed there is growing belief that the government should help create jobs through public works programs, job training programs and tax credits for employers in areas of high unemployment.