

# Labor history in the progressive era essay sample

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



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## **Introduction**

The Progressive Era extended from the Theodore Roosevelt's presidency in 1901 up to the time the United States entered into World War 1. This period was characterized by massive changes in the American labor sector. There were concerns about industrialization, increased urbanization, government influence in the private sector and generally the manner in which America was to take off in Socio-Economic issues. This period saw the emergence of strong labor unions such as the American Federation of Labor (AFL-founded in 1886) and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW-founded in 1905). These labor unions had points of convergence or similarities but they also had glaring differences in terms of strategies and philosophies.

Both the IWW and the AFL were established with the common goal of fighting for the rights of the workers. These rights included decent working and living conditions, better pay and fewer working hours (Heilbroner& Singer, 250; Dubofsky and Dulles, 190). They also existed to bridge the gap between workers and employers' unions in order to forge a common ground and seek workable solutions to the many differences that plagued American labor during the progressive Era (Heilbroner& Singer, 250; Dubofsky and Dulles,

190).

The IWW and the AFL had many differences in philosophies and strategies. The AFL was led by the philosophy pure and simple trade unionism while the IWW sought Revolutionary Industrial Unionism. The IWW pursued industrial unionism for all workers both skilled and unskilled while the AFL pursued the rights of skilled workers. Workers allied to the IWW referred themselves to as “the wobblies” and besides fighting for the rights of unskilled they also championed the rights of minority groups and skilled workers (Dubofsky and Dulles, 190). According to Heilbroner and Singer, the IWW aided the unskilled workers who were desperate and unemployed after flocking to the urban centers in search of employment (248). According to Dubofsky and Dulles, the AFL pursued means that ended up “growing fat while neglecting the needs of millions of laborers who were doomed to a life of want and misery” (Dubofsky and Dulles, 191). These neglected laborers were mainly the unskilled laborers and it is these ones that the IWW sought to help. These workers were mainly African Americans and immigrants who could not be accommodated by the AFL which sought to champion the exclusive rights of skilled workers.

The IWW and the AFL used different strategies to fight for the rights of workers. The IWW sought aggressive and radical means such as strikes and boycotts to fight for certain rights and struggles (Heilbroner & Singer, 250). The AFL on the other hand pursued peaceful means that mainly involved negotiations and the signing of contracts (Dubofsky and Dulles, 164). The AFL also involved less activism and political interference as opposed to the IWW which saw activism and the support of certain politicians as ways and

means to achieve their goal of a fair society for all people (Heilbroner & Singer, 246). The AFL later dropped its non-partisan stand and supported William Jennings Bryan for presidency in 1912 and Woodrow Wilson in 1912. These developments yielded legislations about child labor in 1912 and the Clayton Act of 1914 which protected labor from Antitrust litigations (Dubofsky and Dulles, 187). The IWW had since its inception supported political involvement as a perfect way to achieve the goals and objectives of a labor union.

## **Conclusion**

The progressive period refers to the period between 1901 and 1917 when the US became involved in World War 1. It was a period marked by significant changes in the American labor sector. Key among these changes was the emergence of the AFL in 1886 and the IWW in 1905. These two labor unions were united by the fact they both sought better working conditions, improved pay and fewer working hours for their members. While the AFL pursued a simple trade unionism characterized by minimal radicalism and less political involvement, the IWW pursued its goals through radical unionism and extensive political involvement. IWW was established to help unskilled and minority workers such as unemployed African Americans who had flocked the cities in search of labor. The AFL on the other hand had the main objective as fighting for the rights of skilled workers.

## **Works Cited**

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Heilbroner, Robert L, and Aaron Singer. The Economic Transformation of America: 1600 to the Present. Fort Worth [u. a.: Harcourt Brace College Publ, 1999. Print.