

Research paper on history of american labor (20th century) labor movement and wor...

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



In America, the whole working class has shifted during the time the nation underwent a change from a society based of agriculture to a society profoundly based on the industrial activity. With the industrial revolution, started a continuous increase of search for factory employees, who would work on mass production of various products; these would be organized in a steep hierarchy, having mostly an unskilled labor and receiving low wages for many work hours.

Of course, with such conditions, workers were not happy with their work situation and, soon, labor unions began to surge.

This rapid growth and evolution lead to the concentration, in just 1% of the national population, of more wealth than in the remaining 99%, with a massive social difference. By this time, in the very beginning of the 20th century, the U. S. Steel, for example, had taken up more than 200 manufacturing plants, transportation companies, more than 40 mines, had about 1, 000 miles of railroad taken, employing about 170, 000 workers. On the other hand, there were about 18 million people earning less than the cost for maintaining a family of four. Furthermore, life expectancy was still low, of 48 years for Caucasians and of 34 for the non-Caucasians. In the middle of the workers, one could also find 1. 75 million children under 15 and 5 million women working for more than 10 hours a day.

So it is no surprise thinking of these times as times for great revolts, uprisings and manifestations.

At the same time, the number of non-Caucasians, especially black people working and initiating their own businesses also increased. Immigrant

population also changed, with a few British and Irish people and an increase of Russian, Italian and other immigrants from the southern part of Europe. This, obviously, led to a big competition for work, leading the wages to be kept low and the unions of workers not being able to do that much for the workers by this time. Even so, in 1905, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) was formed, a very important union, with the assistance of Mother Jones, a renowned labor activist.

One of the movements that have been registered as accomplishing positive results for the women's rights was in New York - the 1909 Uprising of Twenty Thousand strike which was over sweatshops. In this movement, The New York Women's Trade Union League faced very cold days, together with police abuse and harassment by scabs.

Additionally, Congress tried to limit the coming of immigrants who were illiterate, in 1913, with a promotion of the unions, to try to stop the taking-over of the jobs, but President William H. Taft vetoed it, stating that illiteracy should not be seen as a test of character, but solely as lack of opportunity for those people. This same year there were violent confrontations from the workers at the Paint Creek-Cabin Creek strike, trying to fight for better conditions in their jobs, in West Virginia; Mother Jones organized, together with the children of the coal miners' a marching protest, being arrested for it and later on pardoned. And in 1914, in a Colorado tent colony (Ludlow), through the " Machine Gun Massacre", strikers finally got the members of the House Mines and Mining Committee and President Woodrow Wilson's attention; the President proposed that the union should reach an agreement with the employers to have truce and to create, in each mine, a grievance

committee.

This was the beginning of a “laissez faire” time, where legislation was created for the support of the American labor. For example, in 1914, the Clayton Antitrust Act was named “Labor’s charter of freedom”, since it had a section in which it was declared that unions shouldn’t be considered unlawful, nor strikes, boycotts and pickets would be seen as federal law violations. Furthermore, and still within this idea, injunction could not now be used – as it was by President Cleveland, breaking up the Pullman Strike – by federal courts in disputes regarding labor issues. Also, in 1916, the Adamson Act, which President Wilson initiated and proposed to Congress, was used in the prevention of a strike on the railroad sector throughout the nation, a threat of four unions of this sector, by providing some benefits to the workers, such as an eight-hours-a-day work schedule. This same year, the Workers Compensation Act for Federal Employees also passed.

The 1930’s

These were very important times for the labor movement, which has gained momentum. With labor force being abundant, the replacement of workers was easy for the employers. The labor unions that were formed were meant to help the organization of workers and would also mediate negotiations with the employing companies for the workers’ needs and rights.

Workers could, by using unions, have a bigger fighting chance and power than struggling individually, because forming large groups of employees, who will gather and then make decisions as one major force, would make employers listen to them and to what they want, for the sake of the whole

business' viability and continuation. Taking all the workers in a factory for example, if they all stopped working at the same time, in a joint decision of doing so, the company could not continue to operate without them; thus, employers would be forced, in these situations, to have negotiations and reach an understanding with the workers.

Even so, the early unions did not have an easy existence, because employers, in the beginning, would refuse to accept the unions and these were often declared as illegal by the courts.

But continuing with the evolution of the movement and of American History, President Franklin D. Roosevelt was another person that had a big impact on the evolution of the workers' situation, by making it part of his 100-day relief legislation, through the National Industrial Recovery Act, in 1933, which encouraged collective negotiation for unions, the set up of a maximum number of work hours, prices, the establishment of a minimum wage standard and taking children out of the industrial activity. Never the less, this has received overturning by the U. S. Supreme Court. Portions of it, however, were used (Wagner Act), in 1935, establishing a National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) that was federally appointed and that would be authorized to discuss labor issues and complaints, through orders of "cease and desist" kind whenever "unfair practices" were used in labor-related situations. It was not well received by the business owners, of course, but the Supreme Court highly supported it and maintained its existence.

In 1935, the National Labor Relations Act was also a breakthrough, because together with other laws, it has required that employers would talk and negotiate with the unions. Following it, political parties and other groups

have also taken their role in this development of events, and became involved with the whole concept of labor movement.

The Great Depression

With Sam Gompers' caution on the policies followed, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) was created, due to the workers' impatience, having hundreds of thousands of signatures from workers, both semi and unskilled, because they saw this as the only union that would protect their interests; and by the middle of the summer, in 1937, it had 4 million subscribers, led by John L. Lewis (United Mine Workers - UMW). The CIO brought together the once opposing industries of automobile, public utilities, steel and textile. Membership of black workers was also encouraged. And the leader, John L. Lewis, secured a closed shop through a series of ordered strikes that gave the CIO the exclusivity of representing the workers in all negotiations and also defended Lewis tactic for a sit-down strike tactic; this meant that the workers would defend a concrete premise, which would keep them in the strike location, without leaving, until their requirements were met.

This tactic's legality was contested by General Motors and Republic Steel in 1937, so that the Michigan courts would rescue back their properties through injunctions against the workers. Of course, it raised further tension between workers and employers and it would have resulted in increased violence without the intervention of Governor Frank Murphy.

In 1938, the Congress had passed the Fair Labor Standards Act, with the aim of eliminating the labor conditions that would keep the workers from having

the minimum conditions for health, their work efficiency and general well being. It was touted by President Franklin Roosevelt and seen as a breakthrough in all the program for the workers' welfare; thus, it achieved to set a maximum of 40 work hours per week and 40 cents for each hour as minimal wage by 1945. Almost 700, 000 workers (including black workers) were benefited by this act with an increase on their wage and about 13 million by the number of hours (except agriculture and domestic fields' black workers).

After World War II

With all the consequences that World War II brought to America, production had a substantial decrease and the overtime hours were not needed anymore. Thus, what happened was not a decrease on the wages, but a reduction in overtime hours, which meant less amount of money brought home (about 50% reduction). Also, with the Congress lifting the price controls that were being done during wartime, the prices had a 25% increase, which resulted, really, in a decrease, in one year, of 12% on the wages.

Of course, this caused more strikes, in a struggle for higher wages, in several industries: coal, steel, automobile, electric appliances and railroad, to which the public had a very strong negative response, being anti-union; the public felt that these unions were now being filled with arrogance and ungratefulness for all the favors they got when the New Deal administrations were in power.

This way, and by an election in which Republicans had the majority in both

houses of Congress, in 1947, the Taft-Hartley Act passed, even with President Harry Truman's veto (who was a Democrat), which outlawed this closed shop policy and exposed unions to the possibility of being accused of damage by contract breaching; it stated that a 60-day "cooling-off" period of time was required before initiating the strikes, made political contributions or excessive dues forbidden for the unions and required an oath from the union officials that would be elected, in which they should state not to be Communists. The union leader, Lewis, felt that this bill was outrageous, together with other labor leaders, seeing it as a "slavery" and "fascist" for the workers; but, ultimately, it did not prove to be the case and such outrages fell short on their aims.

The 1950's

This was the period known as "The Good Life".

During this time, life was indeed good for the average American people; the middle-class American workers' values and sense of prosperity had lost much of the unionism defended before in the country and, now, they were working less than 40 hours per week, together with an annual two-week vacations for most of them and their income having the double of its value since the last economic boom in prosperity, in the 1920's. Women were still being encouraged to be at home instead of working (which was observed during this time) and their alternatives over it only became appealing by the 1960's; at this time, their options for employment were still limited.

The 1960's

These were tumultuous times, when damages were inflicted on the American workers, due to a large number of industries having migrated to the southern states, where the anti-union ideas were much stronger; to an expansion of the middle class that was too fast; and to larger unions' internal corruption, of which the International Brotherhood of Teamsters was a big example.

There was a decline, because of this, from 33 to 28%, of unionized workers that had non-agricultural jobs that was observed between the years of 1955 and 1968. Signing up for membership in unions was only observed with an increase when the large corporations were having a relation with stock markets of great influence, having larger expenses on military defense, increasing the price of necessary goods and products, provoking, consequently, a rise on the inflation and decision making on what concerned the production, the workers' wages and general changes in technical structure.

Thinking about the needs of their employed workers, these same large corporations spent very large sums, from \$4 billion to \$100 billion dollars in 1965, investing in pension funds in the stock market; of course, it also had the aim of enlarging even more their wealth and overall power. By this time, unions that were once the greatest enemies of such corporations were now being almost complacent with their business actions.

Furthermore, in large unions, they have put their own personal goals before the ones that concerned the workers. Thus, well-organized unions, lead by people like Jimmy Hoffa or George Meany, were fragmenting, after 1965, the political parties, were embattling the Congress and also were, in fact, making

it difficult for the efforts of the Congress to be able to end the divisions of America on race, ethnicity and urban issues.

The 1970's and 1980's until nowadays

These were times of heavy flow of immigrants to the United States.

Because of this, in the late 1970's, there was an increase on the economic gap that already existed between the black and the white workers, being that poverty was registered in 31% of the cases of black workers and unemployment of 40% on the teenage blacks class.

Also, there was a wave of modern immigrants arriving, in the 1980's, that came from several countries, such as China, Japan, Mexico, Cambodia, India, Korea and Vietnam; these immigrants soon started to work their way through the economic ladder in a steady pace, because they were accepting all those jobs with low payments that the non-immigrant Americans rejected.

So, the American labor suffered additional strain by this time.

Furthermore, women continued to be more and more involved in the working field; by 1987, there was a percentage of 55% of women that were no longer at home, but working outside, opposing the 40% percentage registered in 1966. There was also a strong movement of activists for women's rights, struggling to improve their working conditions, like the improvement of maternity leave provisions, of day care public funding, and of child-care costs by making them deductible on taxes.

Until nowadays, the labor movement in the United States has continuously grown from the need of keeping the struggle for the workers' common

interests and needs. This has been especially observed during all the 20th century until now in the industrial sector, where the workers have needed (and continue to) fight for higher wages for their work, better and more reasonable work hours and increased safety in their working conditions.

The labor movement was the responsible for the fight to stop child labor also.

Furthermore, it fought for health benefits and aid to be provided for those workers who had been injured on their work, or that retired. Even not being as strong as they were in past decades, unions still exist in industrial and construction sectors and have indeed provided better conditions and salaries for the American workers.

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