

Improvement of american labor

[Countries](#), [United States](#)



Beginning in 1866 until the present time many labor leaders have initiated many effective and important labor laws. Throughout the past one hundred plus years there have been many steps forward in the labor movement along with a few major steps back. The actions of these labor leaders and the accomplishments of the acts that they have helped to pass have paved the way for the American worker in today's society.

One of the labor laws that had an impact was the Taft-Hartley Act. The Taft-Hartley act formerly called the Labor-management Relations Act was passed in 1947. Its founders were Senator Robert A. Taft and Representative Fred A. Hartley. This act helped in collective bargaining along with allowing workers the right to defer from joining a union. This act required unions to give notification of a strike sixty days before it was to occur. It also outlawed specific union practices that were unfair and required that union officers must deny any Communist affiliations while under oath.

Another of the labor acts that contributed to the labor movement was the National Labor Relations Act. It was passed by Congress in 1935. It has been called the Magna Carta of American labor. The National Labor Relations Act guaranteed workers the right to join unions without fear of being punished by management. In order to enforce this law the National Labor Relations Board was formed. This act prevented employers from committing unfair labor practices that would make the worker be afraid to organize a union or sign a union contract.

Yet another labor law was the Davis-Bacon Act of 1931. Created by Congressman Robert Bacon and Senator James Davis, this act was mainly

established to grant stability to the construction industry. The bid requirements on public projects were low and this allowed outside contractors to obtain work on substandard wages. This also caused contractors to look past the high paid local workers to the lower paid workers from around the country. Davis and Bacon felt it was wrong for workers from other areas to be herded together to work for lower wages than the standard in that state.

An important labor leader in the early labor movement was Francis Perkins. Francis Perkins devoted much of her life to the improvement of the American Worker. While going to school at Mt. Holyoke College, Perkins gained an interest in social reform. This interest grew when she joined the National Consumer League, which had a goal to improve labor conditions through consumer pressure. In 1928, New York governor Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed Perkins as the head of the state labor department. Four years later, when Roosevelt was elected to the presidency, Perkins was asked to be his secretary of labor. Perkins played a major role in Roosevelt's response to the Great Depression. She also was an advocate of social security, wage and hour regulation, and the abolition of child labor.

Eugene V. Debs was another famous labor leader. Debs made the first major attempt to form a labor union for both skilled and unskilled workers of a specific industry. This attempt was the American Railway Union. Debs also played a major role in the Pullman Strike in 1894. He asked for arbitration and when Pullman refused to negotiate Debs and the American Railway Union began boycotting Pullman train. Later in the Pullman strike Debs was

arrested. While in prison Debs realized his true calling. He became a spokesperson for the Socialists Party of America and ran for president five times. Surprisingly, in 1912, he won 900, 000 votes. A famous quote of Deb's was, " I say now, that while there is a lower class, I am in it; while there is a criminal element, I am of it; while there is a soul in prison, I am not free."

A significant strike of the past was the aforementioned Pullman Strike. The Pullman strike began during the Panic of 1893. The Pullman Company laid off three thousand of its fifty-eight hundred employees. The Pullman workers all lived in houses owned by the Pullman Company and had to pay rent. The remaining employees had their wages cut twenty-five to thirty percent and the housing prices remained the same. After paying the rent on their homes, their paychecks dwindled down to almost nothing. Later, after the depression, two thousand Pullman workers were hired. Again, the Pullman Company did not restore wages or compensate with lower housing rates. In the spring of 1894, the outraged workers called for a strike. The strike was one of peace, that is until Pullman hired strikebreakers. This brought on a violent end to the strike. In conclusion, Pullman fired most of the strikers and named more to a blacklist.

The Homestead strike occurred in 1892. It began when workers from the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers struck the Carnegie Steel Company's Homestead plant in order to protest a cut in wages. The company's general manager, Henry C. Frick, was determined to break the union. He hired strikebreakers and then hired three hundred detectives to protect the plant and the strikebreakers. After an armed battle between the

detectives and workers, three detectives and six workers were dead. The strike ended on November 20th after the plant reopened and nonunion workers remained on the job. This strike caused a weakening effect on the unions of the steel industry that would take forty years to repair.

A more recent labor issue was the United Parcel Service's strike in 1997. The central issues of this strike were part-time work, pensions, and subcontracting. The union claimed that many part-time workers work full time hours without getting paid the full time rates, which are almost twice that of the part-time. The union also wanted an increase in contributions to its pension and health funds. The union would not budge on this issue and UPS met their demands. The last aspect of the strike was subcontracting. The union claimed that a loophole in their contracts was allowing more than the one percent limit of the business to go to subcontractors. There are many opinions on whether or not the strike was a victory for the union but at the end the workers were back on the job.

The Haymarket Affair, sometimes called the Haymarket Riot, began on the night of May 4, 1886, as a form of protest after the killing of a striker by police on the previous day. On this night 1, 200 protesters met at Chicago's Haymarket Square where police opposed them. Chaos ensued as someone threw a bomb into the police line. Eight men, three speakers and five other radicals, were charged with starting a riot. Four were hanged while one committed suicide in prison. After the Haymarket Affair, the public began to shy away from the labor movement.

In July of 1877 the Strike of 1877 became a turning point in labor history. A worker's strike at the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad began in order to protest the second cut of wages in just a few months. This strike would lead to strikes from every railroad east of the Mississippi and then later would spread to western railroads. Fifty thousand miles of railroad were halted for more than a week. This caused riots in Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Chicago, St. Louis, and San Francisco. After President Rutherford B. Hayes sent troops in to break up the strike, the strikers began to retreat. On August 6th, the strike was over and railroads were up and going again.

The case of Muller vs. Oregon is a famous Supreme Court labor case. The focal points of this case were the Fourteenth Amendment versus the Tenth Amendment. In these times in Oregon it was illegal for a woman to work for more than ten hours in a factory or laundry. In 1905, a suit was filed against Curt Muller for making Mrs. E. Gotcher work more than ten hours. After being found guilty, Muller took his case to the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court would later rule against him.

Another Supreme Court issue of the labor movement was the Munn v. Illinois case. Munn, a partner in a Chicago warehouse firm, had been found guilty by an Illinois court of violating the state laws providing for the fixing of maximum charges for storage of grain. He appealed, contending that the fixing of maximum rates constituted a taking of property without due process of law. The Supreme Court upheld the Granger laws, establishing as constitutional the principle of public regulation of private businesses involved in serving the public interest.

Since 1866 the labor unions have been involved in many more strikes and there have been new labor leaders who have been involved in controversial court cases in order to make sure that workers are treated fairly. Throughout the history of the United States labor has changed greatly and it will continue to change in the future.