

The history of the labor movement



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Since the beginnings of industrialization in the United States, a struggle between the rights of individuals working in industry and manufacturing and the desire of the ownership of these endeavors to maximize profits has raged. As various eras in history passed, labor movements in the United States met with varying degrees of success.

The fortunes of labor movements in the United States has ebbed and flowed along with other key factors in American society. In times when human rights and the rights of the individual were national priorities, the labor movement prospered, in times where businesses and profitability were the priority, the labor movement faltered. In the post-civil war era, 1865-1876, the U. S.

was just getting used to dealing with large numbers of unskilled manufacturing labor, which was derived from European Immigrants, and southern Blacks seeking a better life. (Lane, 1987) The bargaining position of such laborers was weak, since no legislation existed at the time to protect their rights, and any protests made about working conditions or other issues were met with termination and replacement, owing to the large pool of unskilled labor. (Lane, 1987) The time period also met with the rise of the “captains of industry”, many of whom were instrumental in the success of the North during the Civil War. The government was friendlier to these big businesses and very unfriendly to individuals and organizations who sought to look into their activities and practices. Additionally, the War brought major incentive to businesses to develop time-saving mass-production technology. (Lane, 1987) The era between 1877-1920 saw the most dynamic ebb and flow of labor movements in the history of the United States. (Laslett, 1970) Between the creation of the interconnected system of

transportation and communication, and the use of electricity, manufacturing began to become the basis of the American economy.

(Laslett, 1970) Coupled with these innovations was the new concept of applying scientific methodology to industrial processes. (Laslett, 1970) All of these changes, while beneficial to businesses, did little to improve the lot of the industrial laborer. (Laslett, 1970) One of the key complaints of an entirely unregulated labor force in the late 1800s was the extensive use and abuse of child labor. In 1870, nearly three quarters of a million children between the ages of ten and fifteen worked in hazardous aspects of manufacturing, agriculture and street trade. (Laslett, 1970) By 1880, that number was over one point one million, or one in every six children in that age group. (Laslett, 1970) By 1900, that number doubled.

The conditions under which children worked were very dangerous. They worked the same shifts as adults (about 12 hours a day, six days a week), denying them the opportunity for school and play. (Laslett, 1970) The factories, mills, mines and other work venues in which they labored were unsafe and unregulated. Children were also often used in the most dangerous aspects of industrial work, such as clearing jammed machines or working in confined spaces too small for adults. (Laslett, 1970) In 1881, only seven states had any kind of regulation laws for child laborer. Desperate for money to survive, immigrants and working-class Americans forged paperwork to allow their underage children to get employment. (Laslett, 1970) Adults suffered as well from the poor conditions in factories and other work venues.

In 1913, as an example, there were 25, 000 deaths in factories and 700, 000 serious accidents(Laslett, 1970). Organizing labor in such a climate was not an easy task. (Laslett, 1970) Often, owners of factories did not work on site, leaving day-to-day operations to middle management, who were intent on meeting production quotas. Despite the obstacles, some early attempts to draw attention to their lot were made by members of various working groups. Unfortunately, the bad press associated with their early attempts set the mood of the nation against organized labor.

In 1876, the trial of the “ Molly Maguires” was a public repudiation of vigilante efforts against mine owners. The Maguires were accused of using intimidation, beating and killing to combat the anti-union efforts of mine owners. Ironically, the Maguires were copying their methods from the owners themselves. Despite this, twenty-four Maguires were convicted in 1876, and twenty were hanged.

The following year, the first interstate strike in American History occurred. This was the Great Railway Strike of 1877. Reacting to wage cuts, workers across the nation walked off the job, blocked rail lines and destroyed rail property. Such was public sympathy for the strikers, that when local militia were called to disperse them, the soldiers actually joined the strikers. After several days, however, the frenzy died down, public opinion began to turn on the strikers, and, lacking organization or bargaining power, most returned to work. In California, the railroad strike gave rise to a political movement called the Sand Lot Incident. A gathering at San Franciscos “ sand Lot” organized to express sympathy for labor degenerated into anti-Chinese mob attacks and riots.

As a result, the Irish created a political party opposed to Chinese Immigration. In 1878-9, the group won a large number of seats in the states Constitutional Convention, where they were unable to push banning Chinese or any other form of regulation. Despite this failure, the movement illustrated the power of organization and political clout to labor advocates. The formal labor movement, which began in the 1840s with professional guilds and skilled labor organizations, by 1860, there were about 20 such Unions. The first national union effort, the National Labor Union (NLU), was a polyglot combination of labor activists and civil reformers. The group was held together by the dynamic personality of its president, who died in 1869. By 1872, the NLU had failed. The NLU did achieve one success during its tenure.

It was able to see to the passage of the Contracts Labor Law of 1864, which put limitations on the circumstances of immigrant laborers, whose willingness to work for low wages made them unpopular in the early labor movement. As the Depression of 1873 saw the collapse of most union efforts, one group spread rapidly to fill the void. The Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor held its first national convention in 1878, where it endorsed worker cooperatives, free homesteads, bureaus of labor statistics, eight-hour workdays, and other political initiatives to support labor. The group was inclusive to all wage workers, and used strikes and boycotts to achieve their agenda. After founder Uriah Stevens gave way to Terrence Powderly in 1879, the Knights of Labor began to stumble. Powderly did not like strikes and sometimes declined to support them when they occurred. After peaking at more than 700, 000 members in 1886, the Knights faltered

after a failed railway strike in 1886. Jay Gould, the rail owner, used armed guards (Pinkertons) to forcibly break the strike.

The failure of the railways strike in 1886 combined with another incident that same year to seriously curtail the effectiveness of organized labor. A group of anarchists in Chicago, organized a protest over the treatment of strikers at International Harvesters. The rally, held in Haymarket Square, degenerated into a violent clash between police and protesters after an unknown anarchist hurled a bomb at police. From that point on, the influence of the Knights faded as they were associated with the violence of the Haymarket riot.

By 1893, the Knights were no more a force in labor. Skilled Laborers, who opposed industrial unions like the Knights, banded together to form The American Federation of Labor (AFL). After a promising beginning, two more violent strikes, at Homestead ASteel in 1892 and the Pullman Car Company in 1894. Unions and strikers took the blame for the violence in the eyes of the public, taking away the power and prestige of organizing unions.

As the decade drew to a close, social consciousness began to take the place of pure labor efforts, as agitators such as Mother Jones began protesting child labor and supporting other labor improvement efforts. (Chamberlain, 1958) She was active in the movements until her death in 1930.

(Chamberlain, 1958) After the turn of the century, the efforts of socially conscious writers and activists spurred the Progressive movement, which caught up many labor initiatives with it. (Chamberlain, 1958) By graphically describing the poor conditions of factories and laborers to the middle class,

muckrakers (as the journalists were called) were able to spur a major political movement called the Progressive Era.

(Chamberlain, 1958) Spanning from about 1901 until Americas entry into WWI, this movement allowed labor to gain much of what they sought, from child labor restrictions to collective bargaining rights(Chamberlain, 1958) . This lasted until a wave of nationalism swept the nation during WWI. (Karson, 1958) Union efforts were made irrelevant by the labor shortage experienced along with the need for wartime production. (Karson, 1958) By the end of the War, public sentiment had again turned away from organized labor. (Karson, 1958)In the 1920s, a number of factors worked against those seeking rights for labor. (Marx, Jr., 1950) First, the progressives had “ solved” many of the more grievous complaints of the unions, making continued lobbying seem to the public to be unnecessarily greedy.

(Marx, Jr., 1950) Another factor is the Union movements association with the Socialist Party, which fell badly out of favor during the Red Scare of the early 1920s. (Marx, Jr., 1950) Most damaging to union efforts was the success enjoyed by big businesses during the decade. (Marx, Jr., 1950) The extension of personal credit allowed manufactured luxuries to be obtained by the middle class, distracting them from the efforts of the working class unions. (Marx, Jr.

, 1950) The government adopted a very “ hands-off” approach to business during this decade as well. (Marx, Jr., 1950)In the 1930s, the situation went from bad to worse. (Galenson, 1960) The Great Depression made jobs so scarce, that any bargaining power the unions might have had evaporated

along with earning opportunities throughout the decade. (Galenson, 1960) By the time the US entered WWII, which erased the unemployment problem instantly, labor organizers faced the same obstacles as in the previous war: nationalism and the need for wartime production. (Miller and Cornford, 1995) Labor Unions found themselves suspending efforts for the duration of the War.

(Miller and Cornford, 1995) From 1946-1976, the labor unions in the United States became intrinsically connected to local and national politics.

(Galenson, 1996) For most of this time, the nation as a whole enjoyed a high standard of living, decent wages, and a culture that valued conformity.

(Galenson, 1996) The older methods of strikes and boycotts did not fit this society as well, so unions shifted focus. (Galenson, 1996) They sought power in the democratic process by wielding the large numbers of votes they controlled. In the meantime, businesses had been successful in creating non-union shops and undermining the unity of the working class. (Galenson, 1996) With labor no longer speaking with one voice, it was difficult for them to wield influence outside of the halls of party politics. In the mid-to late 1970s, the power of unions rose again as economic hardships in traditional manufacturing areas, such as steel, coal and the like, once again united workers in an attempt to maintain their lively hood. (Galenson, 1996) As the economy began to recover, the power of unions again faded into an entirely political circle from 1976 to the present era.

(Galenson, 1996) The most famous labor incident of the modern era was the Air-Traffic Controllers strike of 1981 illustrated the limits of direct action by Labor Unions. (Galenson, 1996) When the Air Traffic Controllers (a

professional group with highly specialized training) went on strike, the President, Ronald Reagan, citing national security considerations, simply fired them all. (Galenson, 1996) From that point to the present day, the activities of organized labor with respect to strikes has been limited, as have their effects. (Galenson, 1996) Many states have outlawed types of labor unions, making their bargaining position basically nothing, and the influential labor groups continue to lobby for rights in the political arena. (Galenson, 1996) The issues they face are currently issues of wage, retirement benefits, and maintaining employment. (Galenson, 1996) Not having the “ sexy” life-or-death issues of the turn of the century, organized labor continues to fight their battles in state capitals and in Washington DC, utilizing their advantage as a voting block to secure their influence.

(Galenson, 1996)It is clear that the power and influence of the labor movement in the United states has ebbed and flowed as the eras moved past. While not becoming irrelevant, modern Labor Unions have become much more subtle in their dealings with management and government to ensure fair conditions for American laborers. Work Cited Chamberlain, E. et. al.

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