

Union movement in late 19th century

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During 1870 through 1900 workers joined together; responding to the power of their employers caused by the growth of industrialization. The worker did not always have the luxury of leaving after eight hours of work, the right to representation, or the even the right to work in a safe environment. The working people of nineteenth century America had to unite in struggle to achieve the gains that are often taken selfishly and taken for granted today. There were many successes and failures in organized labor; the successes were often obtained through the loss of the worker, often through lost wages, jobs, or even death.

The organization structure of the union during 1870 through 1900 went through different cycles and strategies to achieve what they wanted. One of the first effective regional organized unions was the Knights of Labor formed in 1869. The knights took in not only skilled workers but also any worker that could be truly classified as a producer. The knights took their peak in 1885 when strikes against Union Pacific, Southwest System, and Wabash railroads attracted public sympathy and succeeded in preventing a reduction in wages, at this time they boasted a membership of 700, 000. 1886 was a troubled year for labor relations.

There were nearly 1, 600 strikes involving 600, 000 workers, with the eight-hour day being the important item for all of the strikes. Failure of some of the strikes and internal conflicts between the skilled workers and the unskilled led to a decline in the Knights popularity and influence. Another organization called the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions created a constitution that other unions could adhere to. This constitution met in Pittsburgh on Nov. 15 1881 and was created by representatives of the cigar

makers, the printers, the merchant seamen, steel workers, carpenters and local units of the Knights of Labor.

One of the most important items in the constitution created by the FOTLU recommended that the legal eight-hour work day be an objective for every union to achieve. The FOTLU thus accelerated a strong national push for a shorter work week. The AFL grew from 140, 000 in 1886 to nearly on million by 1900. With these strengths in numbers they often preferred striking over political action. The struggle for workers rights, wage increases and protests against wage cuts were often unsuccessful resulting inviolenceand death.

Chicago workers were agitating for the eight-hour work day for months. On May 1st and 2nd 1886 were eighty thousand workers went on strike, bringing most of Chicago" s manufacturing to a standstill. On May 3rd a fight between hundreds of strikers and non-union replacements broke out. Chicago police quickly moved in to restore order, leaving four unionists dead and many wounded. Angered by the deadly force of the police a group of anarchists called on workers to arm themselves and participate in the massive protest demonstration in Haymarket Square on May 4.

Only 3, 000 members assembled and started out peacefully until late evening when someone still not known to this day threw a bomb that killed seven policemen and injured 67 others. Even though no evidence was ever found about who threw the bomb four anarchists were found guilty and sentenced to death. Ever since the Haymarket square symbolized for radicals and trade unionists everywhere the injustice of a capitalistic society but also associated negatively unions as un-American, criminalistic, and

violent. Many other activists died or received injuries for their cause all around the country.

In July of 1877 strike riots halted the movement of U. S. railroads. After a few weeks of shutting down most of countries railroad system federal troops were sent in to try to end the nationwide strike. This resulted in more violence and death; in Chicago for example federal troops killed 30 workers and wounded over 100. On June 14, 1877 in Pennsylvania ten coal-mining activists were hanged. October 1887 the Louisiana militia shot 35 unarmed black sugar workers striking to gain a dollar-per-day wage and lynched two strike leaders.

1894 federal troops killed 34 American Railway Union members in Chicago attempting to break a strike. July 1892 three hundred Pinkerton guards helped introduce scabs into the workplace by opening fire on striking Carnegie mill steel workers, this resulted in the death of seven guards and eleven strikers. The idea of demonstrations was often to get the attention of management to show that they mean business and can" t be pushed around so easily. New York garment workers won the right to unionize after a seven-month strike.

They secured agreements for a closed shop, and firing of all scabs. Striking miners in Idaho dynamited the Frisco Mill. Leaving it to ruins, getting the attention they wanted. The popularity and growth of unions everywhere showed companies that they are not going to walk over their workers as easily as they did in the past. Although union demonstrations resulted in

workers being injured, dead or fired they set the way for unions in the future to be successful in their endeavors.

These demonstrations were successful in the fact that they showed management and companies that the American worker can unite and be heard as one voice rather than a mass of passive workers that would take any injustice given to them. It is to these unions that we owe many of the benefits and rights we see and use today, such as fighting injustices such as biases and discrimination, winning the right to representation and collective bargaining, and the right to education for every child.