

4 Workers Organize

TERMS & NAMES

sweatshop

Knights of Labor

socialism

Haymarket affair

Pullman Strike

Eugene V. Debs

Samuel Gompers

American Federation
of Labor (AFL)

MAIN IDEA

To increase their ability to bargain with management, workers formed labor unions.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

Many of the modern benefits that workers take for granted were won by early unions.

ONE AMERICAN'S STORY

In 1867, Mary Harris Jones lost her husband and four children during a yellow fever epidemic in Memphis. For the rest of her life, she dressed in black as a sign of mourning. Moving from Memphis to Chicago, Jones started a dressmaking business. But the great Chicago fire of 1871 destroyed everything she owned. Instead of giving up in despair, Jones found a cause to fight for.

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

From the time of the Chicago fire I became more and more engrossed [interested] in the labor struggle and I decided to take an active part in the efforts of the working people to better the conditions under which they worked and lived.

Mary Harris Jones, *Autobiography of Mother Jones*

Jones became an effective labor leader who organized meetings, gave speeches, and helped strikers. Workers loved her so much that they called her Mother Jones. In this section, you will learn why workers went on strike in the late 1800s and the results of those strikes.



Mother Jones won the love of working people by fighting for their rights.

Workers Face Hardships

Business owners of the late 1800s wanted to keep their profits high, so they ran their factories as cheaply as possible. Some cut costs by requiring workers to buy their own tools or to bring coal to heat the factories. Others refused to buy safety equipment. For example, railroads would not buy air brakes or automatic train-car couplers. Because of this, 30,000 railroad workers were injured and 2,000 killed every year.

If a factory became too crowded, the owner rarely built a larger one. Instead, the owner sent part of the work to be done by smaller businesses that critics called sweatshops. **Sweatshops** were places where workers labored long hours under poor conditions for low wages. Often both children and adults worked there.

Factory and sweatshop workers did the same jobs, such as sewing collars or making buttonholes, all day long. They grew bored and did not

Background

Many managers used child labor because children were unlikely to protest poor conditions and worked for less money than adults.

experience the satisfaction that came from making an entire product themselves. Further, both factory and sweatshop owners kept wages low. In the 1880s, the average weekly wage was less than \$10. This barely paid a family's expenses. If a worker missed work due to illness or had any unexpected bills, the family went into debt. Workers began to feel that only other working people could understand their troubles.

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

They know what it is to bring up a family on ninety cents a day, to live on beans and corn meal week in and week out, to run in debt at the stores until you cannot get trusted [credit] any longer, to see the wife breaking down . . . , and the children growing sharp and fierce like wolves day after day because they don't get enough to eat.

A railroad worker, quoted in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 23, 1877



Child labor was common in the late 1800s, and as this boy's bare feet demonstrate, safety practices were rare.

Vocabulary

negotiate: to discuss something in order to reach an agreement

So discontented workers joined together to try to improve their lives. They formed labor unions—groups of workers that negotiated with business owners to obtain better wages and working conditions.

Early Unions

As you read in Chapter 3, the first labor unions began in the mid-1800s but were unable to win many improvements for workers. After the Civil War, some unions started to form national organizations. One of these was the **Knights of Labor**. This was a loose federation of workers from all different trades. Unlike many labor organizations, the Knights allowed women and, after 1878, African-American workers to join their union. They inspired many people to support their cause.

Then, beginning in 1873, the United States fell into a serious economic depression. Over the next four years, millions of workers took pay cuts, and about one-fifth lost their jobs. In July 1877, the Baltimore and Ohio (B & O) Railroad declared a wage cut of 10 percent. The day the pay cut was to go into effect, B & O workers in Martinsburg, West Virginia, refused to run the trains. No labor union had called the strike. The workers themselves had stopped working on their own.

“[Working people] know what it is to bring up a family on ninety cents a day.”

A railroad worker, 1877

This work stoppage was the Railroad Strike of 1877. As the news spread, workers in many cities and in other industries joined in. This threw the country into turmoil. In several cities, state militias battled angry mobs. President Rutherford B. Hayes called out federal troops. Before the two-week strike ended, dozens of people were killed.

The strike did not prevent the railroad pay cut, but it showed how angry American workers had become. In 1884–1885, railroaders again went out on strike. This time they went on strike against the Union

ReadingHistory

A. Analyzing

Causes Why do you think the president acted to stop the strike?

Pacific and two other railroads. The strikers, who were members of the Knights of Labor, gained nationwide attention when they won their strike. Hundreds of thousands of new workers joined the union.

Union Setbacks

The growth of labor unions scared many business leaders. They blamed the labor movement on socialists and anarchists. Socialists believe in **socialism**. In that economic system, all members of a society are equal owners of all businesses—they share the work and the profits. Anarchists are far more extreme. They want to abolish all governments.

Business and government leaders feared that unions might spread such ideas, so they tried to break union power. In Chicago in 1886, the McCormick Harvester Company locked out striking union members and hired strikebreakers to replace them. On May 3, union members, strikebreakers, and police clashed. One union member was killed.

The next day, union leaders called a protest meeting at Haymarket Square. Held on a rainy evening, the rally was small. As police moved in to end the meeting, an unknown person threw a bomb. It killed 7 police and wounded about 60. The police then opened fire on the crowd, killing several people and wounding about a hundred. This conflict was called the **Haymarket affair**.

Afterward, the Chicago police arrested hundreds of union leaders, socialists, and anarchists. Opposition to unions increased. The membership in the Knights of Labor dropped rapidly—even though that wasn't the union that had called the meeting at Haymarket Square.

The Homestead and Pullman Strikes

Labor conflicts grew more bitter. In 1892, Andrew Carnegie reduced wages at his steel mills in Homestead, Pennsylvania, but the union refused to accept the cut. The company responded by locking out union workers from the mills and announcing that it would hire nonunion labor. The

company also hired 300 armed guards. In response, the locked-out workers gathered weapons. The guards arrived on July 6, and a battle broke out that left ten people dead. The Pennsylvania state militia began to escort the nonunion workers to the mills. After four months, the strike collapsed, breaking the union.

Workers lost another dispute in 1894. In that depression year, many railroad companies went bankrupt. To stay in business, the Pullman Palace Car Company, which made railroad cars,

ReadingHistory

B. Recognizing Effects Did the action of the bomber make it seem more or less likely that anarchists were behind union activity? Explain.

ReadingHistory

C. Analyzing Causes Why was it so difficult for early unions to win against big business?

One night during the Pullman Strike, some 600 freight cars were burned.



cut workers' pay 25 percent. But Pullman did not lower the rent it charged workers to live in company housing. After their rent was deducted from the lower pay, many Pullman workers took home almost nothing.

The Pullman workers began the **Pullman Strike**, a strike which spread throughout the rail industry in 1894. When the Pullman Company refused to negotiate, American Railway Union president **Eugene V. Debs** called on all U.S. railroad workers to refuse to handle Pullman cars. Rail traffic in much of the country came to a halt. President Grover Cleveland called out federal troops, which ended the strike. Debs was put in jail.

Gompers Founds the AFL

Not all companies treated workers as harshly as Carnegie and Pullman did. For instance, in the 1880s, the soap company Procter & Gamble began to give its employees an extra half day off a week. It also began a profit-sharing plan, in which a company gives part of its profits to workers.

However, workers at most companies received low wages and few benefits. So in spite of the opposition to unions, the labor movement did not die. In 1886, labor leader **Samuel Gompers** helped found a new national organization of unions called the **American Federation of Labor (AFL)**. Gompers served as AFL president for 37 years.

The AFL focused on improving working conditions. By using strikes, boycotts, and negotiation, the AFL won shorter working hours and better pay for workers. By 1904, it had about 1.7 million members.

In the next few decades, labor unions helped change the way all Americans worked. At the same time, city growth and immigration transformed America. You will read about that in Chapter 7.

Now and then

MODERN BENEFITS WON BY UNIONS

Today, many Americans work 40 hours per week—perhaps 9-to-5, Monday through Friday. Contrast this situation with the 10-to-12-hour days of most 19th-century workers. The 8-hour day was one benefit won by labor unions. Other benefits unions won include workers' compensation (insurance that pays for injuries received on the job), pensions, and paid vacation.

Unions continue to fight to improve the lives of working Americans. In recent years they have tried to increase benefits for part-time and temporary workers. They have also fought for safety standards to prevent injuries, such as carpal tunnel syndrome, which affects many workers who use computers.

ReadingHistory

D. Identifying Problems What problems did the AFL try to solve?

Section 4 Assessment

1. Terms & Names

Explain the significance of:

- sweatshop
- Knights of Labor
- socialism
- Haymarket affair
- Pullman Strike
- Eugene V. Debs
- Samuel Gompers
- American Federation of Labor (AFL)

2. Taking Notes

Review this section and find five key events to place on a time line like the one below.



What individuals played significant roles in these events?

3. Main Ideas

- What hardships did workers face in the late 1800s?
- What happened to unions after the protest at Haymarket Square?
- How did Carnegie's company break the union at the Homestead mills?

4. Critical Thinking

Drawing Conclusions In your opinion, was the government more supportive of unions or business in the late 1800s? Explain.

THINK ABOUT

- the Railroad Strike of 1877
- the Homestead Strike
- the Pullman Strike

ACTIVITY OPTIONS

LANGUAGE ARTS

ART

Decide whether unions should be encouraged. Write an **editorial** or create a **public message poster** expressing your opinion.