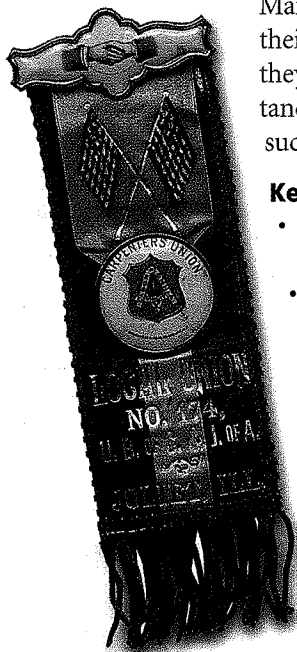




The Great Strikes: A Turning Point in History

SECTION PREVIEW



Many American workers sought relief from their difficult lives through labor unions. What they found in the late 1800s was strong resistance from big business and only fleeting success.

Key Concepts

- The gap between rich and poor widened in the late 1800s.
- Labor unions organized to improve the wages and working conditions of workers.
- Violent strikes marked relations between labor unions and business owners in the late 1800s.

Key Terms, People, and Places

socialism, collective bargaining, scab, anarchist; Pinkerton; Haymarket Square, Homestead, Pullman strike

Workers in many industries formed unions in the late 1800s.

Industrialization brought changes and great wealth to the United States. These changes, however, did not bring contentment or prosperity to the nation's working people. Indeed, as the rich grew richer during this era, these workers became increasingly bitter over their own daily struggle for a decent standard of living. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, working men and women began to take their complaints directly and forcefully to their employers. The resulting turmoil marked a turning point in American history.

The Widening Gulf Between Rich and Poor

The 1890 census revealed that the richest 9 percent of Americans held nearly 75 percent

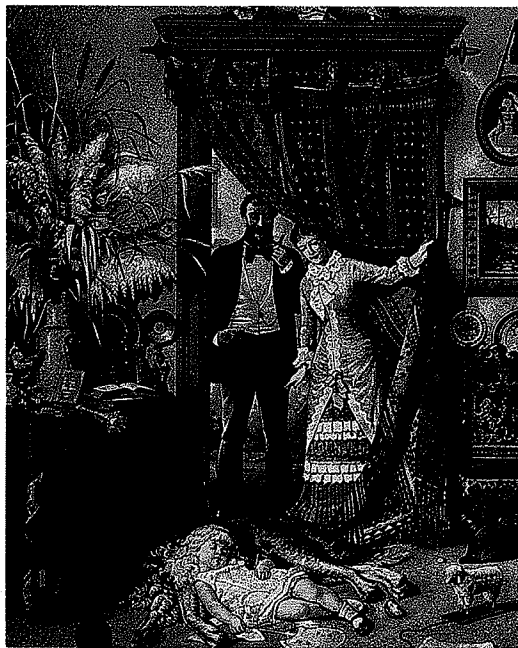
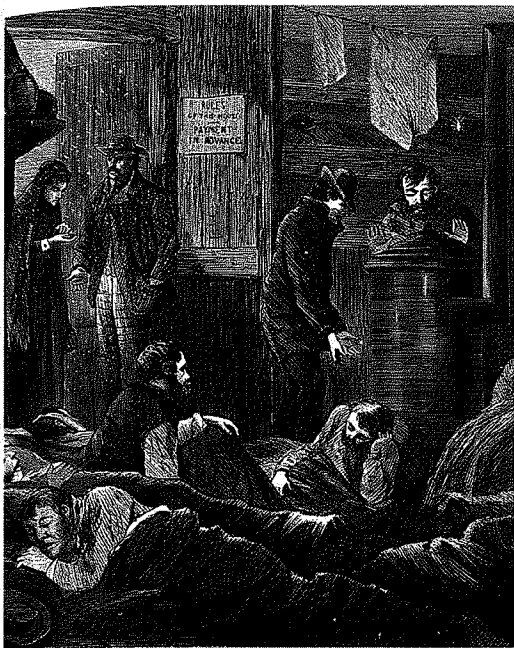
of the national wealth. The nation's workers, however, did not need the census to tell them that they were poor. Able in the best of times to earn only a few hundred dollars a year, workers were well aware of how the elite lived, and they resented it.

Poor families had little hope of relief when hard times hit. Some suffered in silence, trusting that tomorrow would be better; others became politically active in an effort to improve their difficult lives. A few of these individuals were drawn to the idea of socialism then gaining popularity in many European industrialized countries.

Socialism in the Industrial Age

Socialism is an economic and political philosophy that advocates collective or government ownership of factories and property. One goal of socialism is to distribute broadly a society's wealth. In the late 1800s, socialism was strongly influenced by the ideas of Karl Marx, a German philosopher who criticized the capitalist economic system and predicted its eventual overthrow by workers.

Endorsing socialism in the late 1800s was dangerous, however. Most Americans disagreed with socialist theory. They felt that socialism threatened the deeply rooted American ideals of private property and free enterprise—the right of people to compete freely and succeed to whatever extent they can. Most wealthy people also rejected socialism. They would not give up what they owned without a fight. Even though workers had numbers on their side, wealthy Americans knew that if workers tried to bring socialism to the United States by force, the federal government would respond with military action to preserve the nation's economic and political system.



Using Historical Evidence Many workers lived in crowded boarding houses, such as the one shown at left. Many wealthy industrialists, on the other hand, enjoyed great personal wealth and luxurious comforts. How would you expect workers to respond to the contrast between rich and poor?

The Return of Labor Unions

Socialism itself never achieved a significant following in the United States in the nineteenth century. But the limited appeal of its themes did reflect a growing discontent among the nation's workers. Many of these men and women looked instead to labor unions as a way to improve their standard of living.

Early Labor Unions The early years of industrialization had spawned a few labor unions, organized among workers in certain trades, such as construction and textile manufacturing. But these early unions had not lasted long.

Unions resurfaced after the Civil War. These groups were initially designed to provide help for their members in bad times. Soon they became the means for channeling workers' demands for shorter workdays, higher wages, and better working conditions. The increasing emphasis on protest led to growing opposition to unions among employers.

Unions grew significantly in the 1860s and 1870s. Indeed, labor activists began trying to organize nationally based unions. One, the National Labor Union formed in Baltimore in

1866, nominated a candidate for the presidential election of 1872. This union, however, failed to survive an economic downturn that began the following year. Indeed, unions in general suffered a steep decline in membership as a result of the depression.

The Knights of Labor Another early national union, The Noble Order of the Knights of Labor, was formed in Philadelphia in 1869. The Knights hoped to organize virtually all working men and women into a single union. Membership included farmers, factory workers, and white-collar workers. The union actively recruited African Americans, of whom sixty thousand joined.

Under the dynamic leadership of former machinist Terence Powderly, the Knights pursued broad social reforms. These included equal pay for equal work, the eight-hour day, and an end to child labor.

The leadership of the Knights did not generally advocate the use of strikes, and they did not emphasize higher wages as their primary goal. The majority of members, however, often differed with the leadership. In fact, it was a strike that helped the Knights achieve their

greatest strength. In 1885, when unions affiliated with the Knights forced railroad owner Jay Gould to give up a wage cut, membership quickly soared to 700,000. Yet a series of failed strikes quickly followed, dampening enthusiasm in the Knights. They had largely disappeared as a national force by the 1890s.

The American Federation of Labor

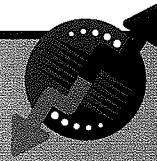
A third national union, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) followed the leadership of Samuel Gompers, a London-born cigar maker. Formed in 1886, the AFL differed from the Knights of Labor by seeking to organize only skilled workers in a network of smaller unions, each devoted to a specific craft. Between 1886 and 1892, the AFL gained some 250,000 members. Yet they still represented only a tiny portion of the nation's labor force.

In theory the AFL was open to African Americans. Local unions, however, often found ways to exclude African Americans from their membership. Gompers also opposed women members because he believed that their participation in the work force drove wages down.

We know to our regret that too often are wives, sisters and children brought into the factories and workshops only to reduce the wages and displace the labor of men—the heads of families.

Samuel Gompers, *Labor and the Employer*, 1887

Gompers and the AFL were primarily interested in issues of wages, hours, and working conditions—so-called bread-and-butter unionism. They sought to force employers to participate in **collective bargaining**, in which workers nego-



Viewpoints On Labor Unions

The Senate Committee on Education and Labor held a series of hearings concerning the relationships between workers and management in 1883. The committee heard these opposing views about the need for labor unions. *What is the major argument presented in each of the two viewpoints below?*

Testimony of a Labor Leader

"The laws written [by Congress] and now in operation to protect the property of the capitalist and the moneyed class generally are almost innumerable, yet nothing has been done to protect the property of the workingmen, the only property that they possess, their working power, their savings bank, their school, and trades union."

Samuel Gompers, founder of the American Federation of Labor in 1886

Testimony of a Factory Manager

"I think that . . . in a free country like this . . . it is perfectly safe for at least the lifetime of this generation to leave the question of how a man shall work, and how long he shall work, and what wages he shall get to himself."

Thomas L. Livermore, manager for the Amoskeag Manufacturing Company, Manchester, New Hampshire

tiated as a group with employers. The Federation believed that workers acting as a group had more power than a worker acting individually. To strengthen its collective bargaining power, the Federation advocated a "closed shop" that employed only Federation members.

Growing Friction Between Labor and Employers

Not surprisingly, employers disliked and feared unions. They preferred to deal with employees as individuals instead of in powerful groups. Employers took measures to stop unions, such as forbidding union meetings and firing union organizers. They even forced new employees to sign "yellow dog" contracts that exacted a promise never to join a union or to participate in a strike. Some business leaders refused to recognize unions as the workers' legitimate representative and appointed one company president:

Rights and interests of the laboring man will be protected and cared for—not by the labor agitators, but by the Christian men to whom God has given control of the property interests of the country.

George F. Baer, mining company president, 1902

Unions, of course, demanded more than recognition. The competing interests of labor and employers would not be easily reconciled.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Consider the statement above by George F. Baer. How does it relate to the idea of social Darwinism discussed in Section 2?

The Railroad Strike of 1877

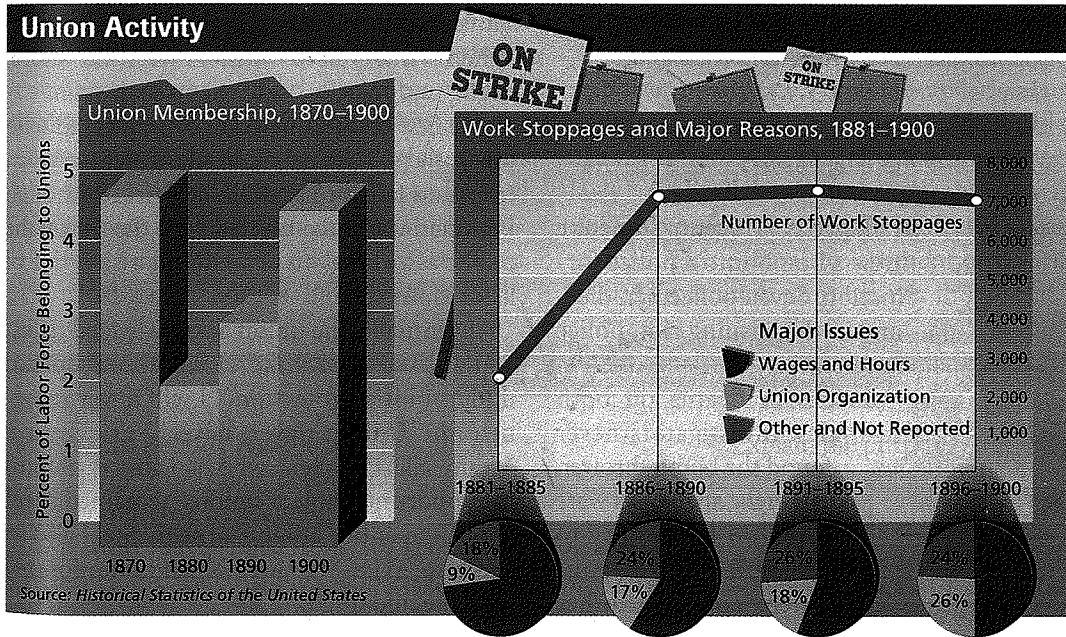
The nation's first major episode of labor unrest occurred in the summer of 1877 in the railroad industry. The strike began when the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad announced a wage cut of 10 percent, the second cut in eight

months. Railroads elsewhere imposed similar cuts, along with orders to run “double headers,” trains with two engines, twice as many cars—and an increased risk of accident and worker layoffs. Violent reactions against these moves among railway workers spread rapidly across Pennsylvania and Ohio and on to Chicago, Illinois, and St. Louis, Missouri. When the local militia in Pittsburgh refused to stop the unrest, employers called in troops from Philadelphia, who fired on the demonstrators, killing and wounding many. A crowd of twenty thousand angry men and women reacted to the shootings by setting fire to railroad company property. President Rutherford B. Hayes then sent in federal troops, a move that stopped the riots but caused more deaths.

From the 1877 strike on, employers relied on federal and state troops to repress labor unrest. A new and violent era in labor relations had begun.

Strikes Rock the Nation

The period 1881–1900 was one continuing industrial crisis in the United States. An amazing



Interpreting Graphs A severe economic depression helped cause a steep decline in union membership in the 1870s. But the 1880s and 1890s saw growth in the numbers of members and in work stoppages. What trends can you identify in the causes of work stoppages in the late 1800s?

The violence of the Haymarket incident, depicted here, troubled many Americans.

24,000 strikes erupted in the nation's factories, mines, mills, and yards during those two decades alone. Out of this ongoing turmoil, three major incidents of industrial warfare overshadow the rest.

Haymarket, 1886 On May 1, 1886, several workers' groups mounted a national demonstration for an eight-hour work day. "Eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, eight hours for what we will," ran the cry. Strikes then broke out in a number of cities. At Chicago's McCormick reaper factory, police broke up a fight between strikers and **scabs**, strikebreakers who replace striking workers and allow a company to continue operating. The police action caused several casualties among the workers.

In protest, **anarchists** called a rally for the evening of May 4 in Chicago's **Haymarket Square**. Anarchists are political radicals who oppose all government on the grounds that it limits individual liberty and acts in the interests of the wealthy, ruling classes. In an effort to whip up the anger of the workers, anarchist newspaper editor August Spies wrote

You have endured the pangs of want and hunger; your children you have sacrificed to the factory-lords. In short, you have been miserable and obedient slaves all these years. Why? To satisfy the insatiable greed, to fill the coffers of your lazy thieving master!

At the May 4 event, someone threw a bomb into a police formation. Seven policemen died, and in the ensuing riot, police and citizen gunfire resulted in dozens of deaths on both sides. Investigators never found the bomb thrower, yet eight anarchists were tried for conspiracy to commit murder. Four were hanged. Another committed suicide in jail. In the belief that the convictions were the result of public

hysteria rather than evidence, Governor John P. Altgeld of Illinois later pardoned the remaining three anarchists.

To many unionists, the Haymarket anarchists forever would be heroes. To employers, they remained vicious criminals determined to overthrow law and order. In many people's minds, unions were associated with violence and radical ideas. The Knights of Labor especially suffered from this public reaction.

Homestead, 1892 Continued labor unrest renewed fears of social revolution. It was in this environment that labor strife struck Andrew Carnegie's enterprise.

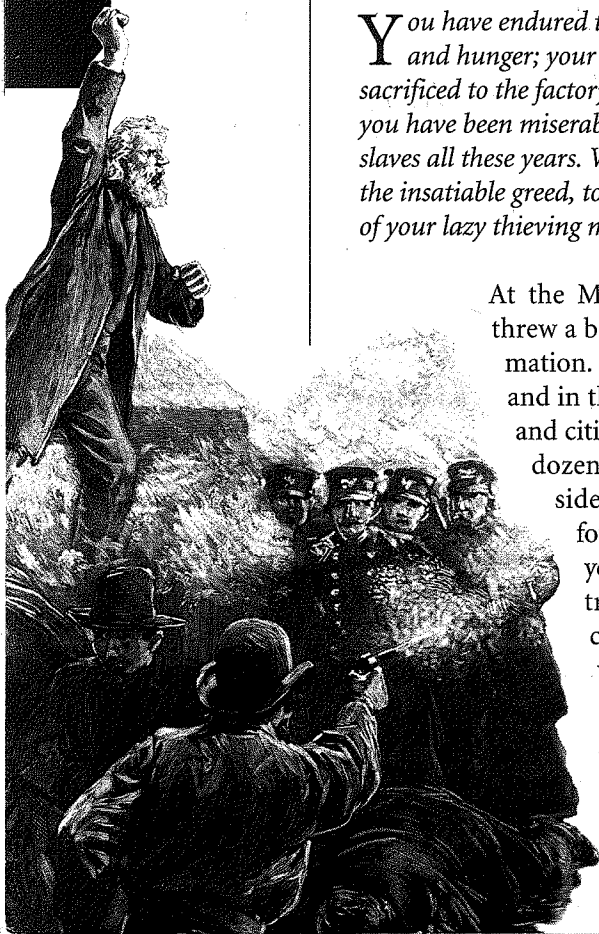
A union of iron and steel workers associated with the American Federation of Labor had negotiated a labor contract with Andrew Carnegie's steel company. In the summer of 1892, while Carnegie was in Europe, his partner Henry Frick tried to cut wages for company workers. The union at the Carnegie plant in **Homestead**, Pennsylvania, called a strike.

Frick, perhaps with Carnegie's support, was intent on crushing the union. On July 1, Frick called in the **Pinkertons**, a private police force known for its ability to break strikes. Under cover of darkness, three hundred Pinkertons moved up the Monongahela River on barges. When strikers fired on them from the shore, deaths and injuries occurred on both sides.

At first many Americans sympathized with the workers. Then anarchist Alexander Berkman tried and failed to assassinate Frick. Although Berkman was unconnected with the strike, the public associated his act with the rising tide of labor violence.

Eventually, the union acknowledged defeat and called off the strike. Homestead reopened under militia protection. "I will never recognize the Union, never, never!" Frick cried. Meanwhile, Carnegie, who had always claimed to support nonviolent unions, remained silent about the entire affair. Carnegie Steel and its successor (U.S. Steel) remained nonunionized until the mid-1930s.

Pullman, 1894 Like the strike of 1877, the last of the great strikes also involved the railroad industry. This strike also completed a turning



point in the federal government's involvement with labor-employer relations.

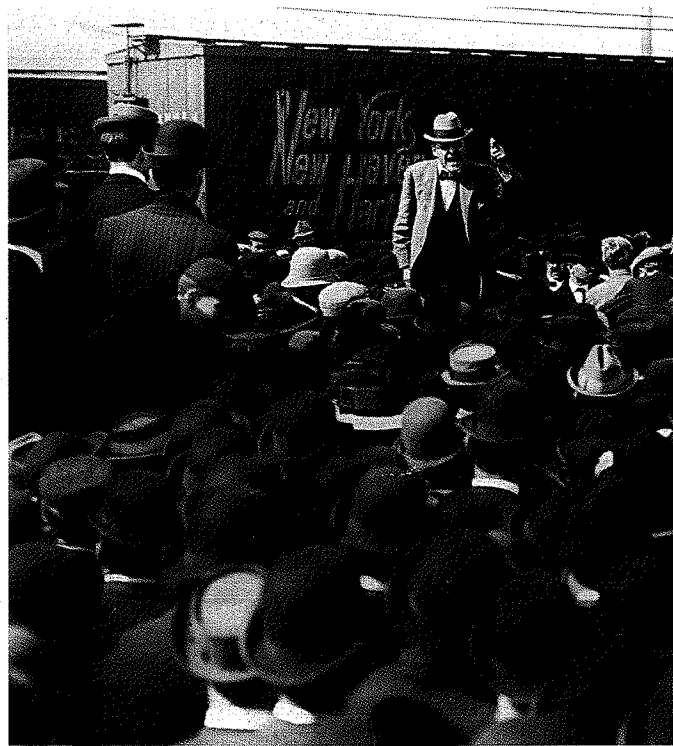
Sleeping-car maker George Pullman considered himself one of the era's most benevolent industrialists. He built a town for his workers near Chicago that boasted a school, bank, water and gas systems, and comfortable homes.

Conditions in the town, however, took a turn for the worse during a depression in 1893. Pullman laid off workers and cut wages 25 to 40 percent. Meanwhile, he kept rent and food prices in his town at the same levels. In May 1894, a delegation of workers went to him to protest. Pullman's response was to fire three of the workers. When the American Railway Union called a strike, Pullman refused to negotiate and shut down the plant.

The founder of the American Railway Union was Eugene V. Debs, a popular labor organizer from Indiana. By June 1894, Debs had encouraged 120,000 railway workers throughout the region to join in the **Pullman strike**. Though Debs had instructed strikers not to interfere with the nation's mail, the strike led to the complete disruption of western railroad traffic, including the delivery of the mail.

Railroad owners turned to the federal government for help. Arguing that the mail had to get through—and citing the Sherman Antitrust Act—Attorney General Richard Olney won court orders forbidding all union activity that halted railroad traffic. President Grover Cleveland sent in troops to ensure that strikers obeyed the court orders. Twelve deaths and many arrests resulted from ensuing violence.

Debs, who refused to obey the court orders, was jailed for six months. Its leadership in dis-



Eugene Debs was a tremendously successful labor organizer in the late 1800s. Later, Debs would combine his energetic style and his belief in socialism to conduct several unsuccessful presidential campaigns as the leader of the Socialist party.

array, the American Railway Union and its strike fell apart.

The Pullman strike and its outcome set an important pattern. In the years ahead, factory owners appealed frequently for court orders against unions. The federal government regularly responded to these appeals, denying unions recognition as legally protected organizations. This official government opposition helped limit union gains for over thirty years.

SECTION 4 REVIEW

Key Terms, People, and Places

1. Identify (a) socialism, (b) scab, (c) anarchist, (d) collective bargaining.
2. Identify (a) the Pinkertons, (b) Haymarket Square, (c) Homestead, (d) Pullman strike.

Key Concepts

3. How did industrial growth in the late 1800s affect the distribution of wealth?

4. Explain the purpose and goals of labor unions.
5. How successful were labor unions in the late 1800s?

Critical Thinking

6. **Recognizing Bias** Many labor unions did not include or effectively represent the concerns of women or minorities. What does this fact suggest about their view of worker rights?