Workers Strike Back

As industrialization occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century many Americans became concerned that the new corporate giants were manipulating their business to benefit a few but exploit everyone else – especially workers. Workers responded by organizing and developing labor unions in an effort to negotiate directly with employers and to lobby government for laws that would protect workers.

The most important union of the late nineteenth century was the Knights of Labor founded in 1869 as a secret society of tailors in Philadelphia. The organization grew slowly during the hard years of the 1870s, but worker militancy rose toward the end of the decade, especially after the great railroad strike of 1877, and the Knights’ membership rose with it. Grand Master Workman Terence V. Powderly took office in 1879, and under his leadership the Knights flourished; by 1886 the group had 700,000 members. Powderly dispensed with the earlier rules of secrecy and committed the organization to seeking the eight-hour day, abolition of child labor, equal pay for equal work, and political reforms including the graduated income tax.

Unlike most trade unions of the day, the Knights’ unions were vertically organized—each included all workers in a given industry, regardless of trade. The Knights were also unusual in accepting workers of all skill levels and both sexes; blacks were included after 1883 (though in segregated locals). On the other hand, the Knights strongly supported the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Contract Labor Law of 1885; like many labor leaders at the time, Powderly believed these laws were needed to protect the American work force against competition from underpaid laborers imported by unscrupulous employers.

Powderly believed in boycotts and arbitration, but he opposed strikes. He had only marginal control over the union membership, however, and a successful strike by the Knights against Jay Gould’s southwestern railroad system in 1884 brought a flood of new members. By the beginning of 1886, there were 700,000 Knights of Labor. But when the workers struck the Gould system again in the spring of 1886, they were badly beaten. Meanwhile, other members of the Knights participated—again, over Powderly’s objections—in the general strike that began in Chicago on May 1, 1886. When a bomb explosion at a workers’ rally in Haymarket Square May 4 triggered a national wave of arrests and repression, labor activism of every kind suffered a setback, and the Knights were particularly—though unfairly—singled out for blame. By 1890, the membership had fallen to 100,000. Although Powderly’s somewhat erratic leadership and the continuing factionalism within the union undoubtedly contributed to the Knights’ demise, the widespread repression of labor unions in the late 1880s was also an important factor.

In December of 1886, the same year the Knights of Labor was dealt its fatal blow at Haymarket Square, Samuel Gompers met with the leaders of other craft unions to form the American Federation of Labor. The A.F. of L. was a loose grouping of smaller craft unions, such as the masons’ union, the hatmakers’ union or Gompers’s own cigarmakers' union. Every member of the A.F. of L. was therefore a skilled worker.

Gompers had no visions of uniting the entire working class. Tradespeople were in greater demand and already earned higher wages than their unskilled counterparts. Gompers knew that the A.F. of L. would have more political and economic power if unskilled workers were excluded. He served as president of the union every year except one until his death in 1924.

Although conservative in nature, Gompers was not afraid to call for a strike or a boycott. The larger A.F. of L. could be used to support these actions, as well as provide relief for
members engaged in a work stoppage. By refusing to pursue a radical program for political change, Gompers maintained the support of the American government and public. By 1900, the ranks of the A.F. of L. swelled to over 500,000 tradespeople. Gompers was seen as the unofficial leader of the labor world in America.

Simplicity worked. Although the bosses still had the upper hand with the government, unions were growing in size and status. There were over 20,000 strikes in America in the last two decades of the 19th century. Workers lost about half, but in many cases their demands were completely or partially met. The A.F. of L. served as the preeminent national labor organization until the Great Depression when unskilled workers finally came together. In 1955 it combined with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (which had been founded in 1932) to form the largest labor union in the United States. From 1955 to 2005 it will represent nearly all unionized workers in the United States.

Despite the success of the A.F. of L. in attracting members, two violent incidents in the 1890s stalled the emerging union movement. The Homestead strike, in Homestead, Pennsylvania, pitted one of the most powerful new corporations, Carnegie Steel Company, against the nation’s strongest trade union, the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers. An 1889 strike had won the steelworkers a favorable three-year contract; but by 1892 Andrew Carnegie was determined to break the union. His plant manager, Henry Clay Frick, stepped up production demands, and when the union refused to accept the new conditions, Frick began locking the workers out of the plant.

On July 2 all were discharged. The union, limited to skilled tradesmen, represented less than one-fifth of the thirty-eight hundred workers at the plant, but the rest voted overwhelmingly to join the strike. An advisory committee was formed, which directed the strike and soon took over the company town as well. Frick sent for three hundred Pinkerton guards, but when they arrived by barge on July 6 they were met by ten thousand strikers, many of them armed. After an all-day battle, the Pinkertons surrendered and were forced to run a gauntlet through the crowd. In all, nine strikers and seven Pinkertons were killed; many strikers and most of the remaining Pinkertons were injured, some seriously.

The sheriff, unable to recruit local residents against the strikers, appealed to Governor William Stone for support; eight thousand militia arrived on July 12. Gradually, under militia protection, strikebreakers got the plant running again. Frick’s intransigence had won sympathy for the strikers, but an attempt on his life by anarchist Alexander Berkman on July 23 caused most of it to evaporate. Meanwhile, the corporation had more than a hundred strikers arrested, some of them for murder; though most were finally released, each case consumed much of the union’s time, money, and energy. The strike lost momentum and ended on November 20, 1892. With the Amalgamated Association virtually destroyed, Carnegie Steel moved quickly to institute longer hours and lower wages. The Homestead strike inspired many workers, but it also underscored how difficult it was for any union to prevail against the combined power of the corporation and the government.

The most famous and farreaching labor conflict in a period of severe economic depression and social unrest, the Pullman Strike began May 11, 1894, with a walkout by Pullman Palace Car Company factory workers after negotiations over declining wages failed. These workers appealed for support to the American Railway Union (ARU), which argued unsuccessfully for arbitration. On June 20, the ARU gave notice that beginning June 26 its membership would no longer work trains that included Pullman cars.
The boycott, although centered in Chicago, crippled railroad traffic nationwide, until the federal government intervened in early July, first with a comprehensive injunction essentially forbidding all boycott activity and then by dispatching regular soldiers to Chicago and elsewhere. The soldiers joined with local authorities in getting the trains running again, though not without considerable vandalism and violence. ARU president Eugene Victor Debs was arrested and subsequently imprisoned for disregarding the injunction. The boycott and the union were broken by mid-July, partly because of the ARU's inability to secure broader support from labor leaders.

George Pullman attracted broad criticism and his workers sympathy. A federal panel appointed to investigate the strike sharply criticized the company's paternalistic policies and refusal to arbitrate, advancing the idea of the need for unions and for increased government regulation in an age of large-scale industrialization. However, the use of an injunction for such purposes, upheld by the Supreme Court in 1895, was a setback for unionism, and most public sentiment was against the boycott.

The Industrial Workers of the World (aka the Wobblies) was established in Chicago, in 1905, by members of the socialist-led Western Federation of Miners and other groups opposed to what they saw as "class collaboration" by the American Federation of Labor (A.F.L.). The driving force behind the I.W.W. was William D. Haywood, the leader of the Western Federation of Miners, which had established a reputation for work stoppages in Colorado mines.

The Wobblies wanted to create "one big union" of all workers no matter what their trade or skill. the IWW organized on a class basis, welcoming all working people including immigrants minorities, and women. They hoped that collective action would bring pay increases, shorter hours, and safer working conditions.

From its inception, the IWW’s goal was to promote worker solidarity in the revolutionary struggle to overthrow the employing class. In particular, the IWW was organized because of the belief among many unionists socialists, anarchists, Marxists, and radicals that the AFL not only had failed to effectively organize the U.S. working class, as only about 5% of all workers belonged to unions in 1905. The IWW willingly employed strikes, boycotts, slowdowns, and other forms of direct action to achieve their ends. Its tactics often led to arrests and sensational publicity.

At their peak in August 1917, IWW membership was over 150,000. Nonetheless, membership declined dramatically in the 1920s due to several factors. Many Americans considered the organization too radical and a threat to capitalism. The IWW was the only labor organization to oppose US participation in World War I which exacerbated the public’s negative perception of the union. Membership also declined in the wake of government crackdowns on radical, anarchist and socialist groups during the First Red Scare after WWI. In the 1920s the IWW was torn by ideological splits, personality tensions, and factional divisions. By 1925 membership dwindled to insignificance.

Industrial workers organized to fight for their rights. New unions sought to protect worker's rights. The nation was wracked by strikes. Grand visions of a different kind of society were born but not achieved. More basic demands - for higher pay, safer conditions, shorter work days - were only partially met, and it would be another 2 decades that industrial workers could get much of what they were asking for.