

1866
National Labor
Union organized

1877
Nationwide
rail strike

1886
Haymarket
Riot

1886
American
Federation of
Labor organized

1892
Homestead
Strike

1894
Pullman
Strike

1860

1870

1880

1890

1900

4 The Great Strikes

SECTION PREVIEW

Objectives

- 1 Summarize the growing gulf between rich business owners and poor workers.
- 2 List some of the early labor unions and their activities.
- 3 Describe the causes and outcomes of the major strikes of the late 1800s.
- 4 **Key Terms** Define: socialism; collective bargaining; scab; anarchist; Haymarket Riot; Homestead Strike; Pullman Strike.

Main Idea

In the late 1800s workers organized labor unions to improve their wages and working conditions.

Reading Strategy

Reinforcing Key Ideas Make a table with two columns on a sheet of paper. Label one column *Successes* and the other *Failures*. As you read, use the table to keep track of the successes and failures of labor unions.

Industrialization brought great wealth to the United States. Few of the nation's working people, however, shared in that wealth. As the rich grew richer during this era, many workers became bitter that they had to struggle so hard each day just to survive. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, working men and women began to take their complaints directly and forcefully to their employers.

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. In the best of times, workers could earn only a few hundred dollars a year, barely enough to get by. They resented the extravagant lifestyles of many factory owners.

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 lives. A few of these individuals

were drawn to the idea of socialism, which was then gaining popularity in Europe.

Socialism is an economic and political philosophy that favors public (or social) control of property and income, not private control. Socialists believe that society at large, not just private individuals, should take charge of a nation's wealth. That wealth, they say, should be distributed to everyone.

Socialism began in the 1830s as an idealistic movement. Early Socialists believed that people should cooperate, not compete, in producing goods. Socialism then grew more radical, reflecting the ideas of a German philosopher named Karl Marx. In 1848 Marx, along with Friedrich Engels, wrote a famous pamphlet called the *Communist Manifesto*. In it they denounced the capitalist economic system and predicted that workers would one day overturn it.

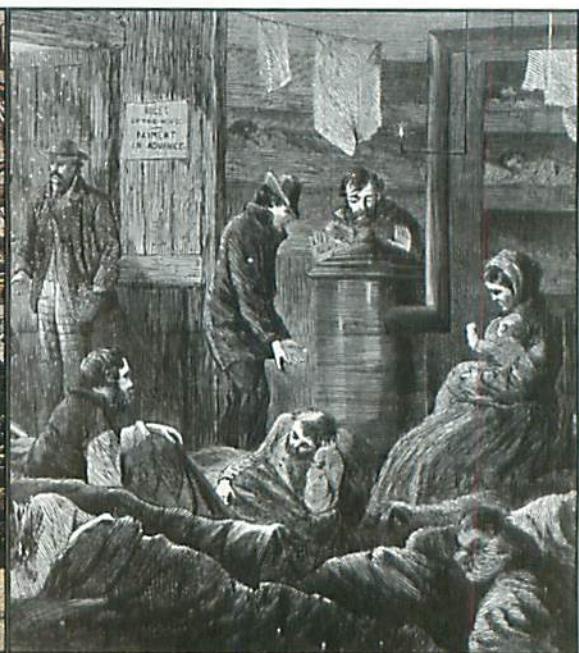
Most Americans opposed socialism. The wealthy saw it as a threat to their fortunes. Politicians saw it as a threat to public order. Americans in general, including most workers, saw it as a threat to the deeply rooted



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



Many workers lived in crowded boarding-houses (far right). Many wealthy industrialists, on the other hand, enjoyed great personal wealth and luxurious comforts (left). **Economics** How did many workers respond to the contrast between the rich and poor?



American ideals of private property, free enterprise, and individual liberty.

The Rise of Labor Unions

A small percentage of American workers did become Socialists and called for an end to free enterprise. Far more workers, however, chose to work within the system by uniting to form labor unions.

Early Labor Unions Workers formed a few local labor unions during the early years of industrialization. These were called trade unions, and they were organized for workers in specific trades. The Federal Society of Journeymen Cordwainers (shoemakers), founded in Philadelphia in 1794, was the strongest of these early unions. Still, it lasted only until 1806, when it was outlawed for engaging in a strike.

Philadelphians took the labor movement to the next level in 1827, when several craft groups joined to form the Mechanics' Union of Trade Societies. This city-wide form of trade union spread quickly to other cities in the East. In 1834 a number of these groups, representing about 21,000 members, organized the National Trades Union. Open to workers from all crafts, the National Trades Union was the first national labor organization. It lasted only a few years before being destroyed by the panic and depression that began in 1837.

Strong local unions resurfaced after the Civil War. They began as a way to provide help for their members in bad times, but soon became the means for expressing workers' demands to employers. These demands included shorter workdays, higher wages, and better working conditions.

In the 1860s and 1870s labor activists again began organizing nationally. In Baltimore in 1866 they formed the National Labor Union, representing some 60,000 members. In 1872 this union nominated a candidate for President. It failed, however, to survive a depression that began the following year. Indeed, unions in general suffered a steep decline in membership as a result of the poor economy.

The Knights of Labor Another national union, the Noble Order of the Knights of Labor, was formed in Philadelphia in 1869. The Knights hoped to organize all working men and women, skilled and unskilled, into a single union. Membership included farmers and factory workers as well as shopkeepers and office workers. The union actively recruited African Americans, 60,000 of whom 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. They did not emphasize higher wages as their primary goal.

Main Idea CONNECTIONS

What was the National Trades Union?

The leaders of the Knights preferred not to use the strike as a tool. Most members, however, differed with their leadership on this issue. In fact, it was a strike that helped the Knights achieve their greatest strength. In 1885, when unions linked to 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 followed, some of them violent. Membership dropped off, and public support for the Knights waned. By the 1890s the Knights had largely disappeared as a national force.

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 had different objectives than the Knights of Labor. The AFL sought 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 total labor force. Few African Americans joined. In theory the AFL was open to African Americans, but local unions often found ways to exclude them from membership. Women, too, were not welcome in the AFL. Gompers opposed the membership of women because he believed that their presence in the work force would drive wages down, as he stated:

AMERICAN VOICES

“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

Gompers and the AFL focused mainly on issues of workers' wages, hours, and working conditions. This so-called bread-and-butter unionism set the AFL apart from the Knights of Labor. The Knights had sought to help their members through political activity and education. The AFL relied on economic pressure, such as strikes and boycotts, against employers.

Through these tactics the AFL tried to force employers to participate in **collective bargaining**, a process in which workers negotiate as a group with employers. Workers act-

ing as a group had more power than a single worker acting alone. To strengthen its collec-

COMPARING PRIMARY SOURCES

LABOR UNIONS

In 1883 the Senate Committee on Education and Labor held a series of hearings concerning the relationship between workers and management. The committee heard these opposing views about the need for labor unions.

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,
labor leader

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 of a manufacturing company

ANALYZING VIEWPOINTS Compare the main arguments made by the two speakers.

tive bargaining power, the AFL pressed for a “closed shop,” a workplace in which only union members would be hired.

The Wobblies The AFL improved the lives of its members, but its policies did not suit all workers. In 1905 in Chicago, 43 groups opposed to the AFL founded the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), also known as Wobblies. A radical labor organization with many Socialists among its leadership, the IWW focused on unskilled workers. It represented mainly western miners, lumbermen, migrant farm workers, and some eastern textile workers.

Reaction of Employers By and large, employers disliked and feared unions. They preferred to deal with employees as individuals instead of in powerful groups. Employers took several measures to stop unions:

- (1) They forbade union meetings.
- (2) They fired union organizers.

(3) They forced new employees to sign “yellow dog” contracts, in which workers

promised never to join a union or participate in a strike.

(4) They refused to bargain collectively when strikes did occur.

(5) They refused to recognize unions as their workers' legitimate representatives.

In 1902 George F. Baer, the president of a mining company, reflected the opinions of many business leaders when he wrote: "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."

The Railroad Strike of 1877

The first major case of nationwide labor unrest in the United States occurred in the railroad industry. The strike began on July 14, 1877, when the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad announced a wage cut of 10 percent in the midst of a depression. This was the second wage cut in eight months. Railroads elsewhere imposed similar cuts, along with orders to run "double headers," trains with two engines and twice as many cars as usual. The unusually long trains increased the risk of accidents and the chance of worker layoffs.

Railway workers in Baltimore reacted with violence. Rioting spread rapidly to Pittsburgh, Chicago, St. Louis, and other cities. In Martinsburg, West Virginia, strikers turned back the local militia. President Rutherford B. Hayes sent in federal troops to put down a

strike, the first time this had been done in American history.

A week later in Pittsburgh, soldiers fired on rioters, killing and wounding many. A crowd of 20,000 angry men and women reacted to the shootings by setting fire to railroad company property, causing more than \$5 million in damage. President Hayes again chose to send in federal troops.

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.

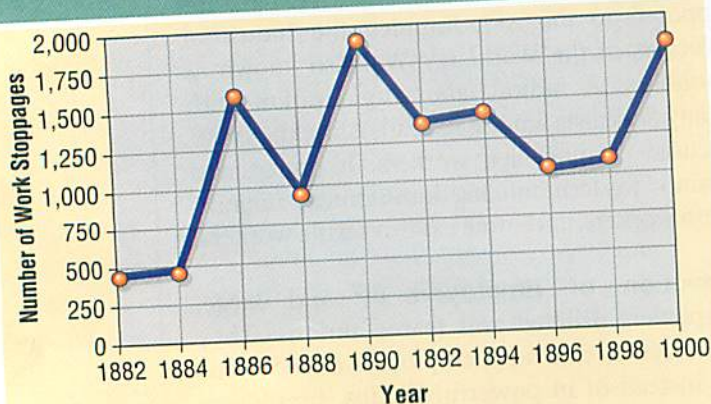
Strikes Rock the Nation

From 1881 to 1900 the United States faced one industrial crisis after another. Some 24,000 strikes erupted in the nation's factories, mines, mills, and rail yards during those two decades alone. Three events were particularly violent: the Haymarket Riot and the Homestead and Pullman strikes.

Haymarket, 1886 On May 1, 1886, groups of workers mounted a national demonstration for an eight-hour workday. "Eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, eight hours for what we will," ran the cry. Strikes then erupted in a number of cities.

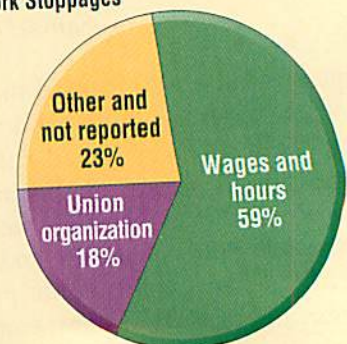
On May 3 at Chicago's McCormick reaper factory, police broke up a fight between strikers and scabs. (**Scabs** are workers called in by an employer to replace striking laborers. Using scabs allows a company to continue operating

Work Stoppages, 1882–1900



Source: Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970

Reasons for Work Stoppages



Source: Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970



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 number of members and in the number of work stoppages. **Economics** What were the major reasons for work stoppages in the late 1800s?

and avoid having to bargain with the union.) The police action caused several casualties among the workers.

Union leaders called for a protest rally on the evening of May 4 in Chicago's Haymarket Square. A group of **anarchists**, radicals who violently oppose all government, joined the strikers. Anarchists, such as newspaper editor August Spies, knew how to whip up anger among the workers. He stated:

AMERICAN VOICES

“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!”

—August Spies

At the May 4 event someone threw a bomb into a police formation, killing seven officers. In the riot that followed, gunfire between police and protesters killed dozens 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. Governor John P. Altgeld of Illinois decided later that the convictions resulted from public outrage rather than evidence. He pardoned the remaining three anarchists.

To many unionists, the anarchists who took part in the **Haymarket Riot** forever would be heroes. To employers, however, they remained vicious criminals determined to undermine law and order. Much of the American public came to associate unions in general with violence and radical ideas.

Homestead, 1892 In the summer of 1892, while Andrew Carnegie was in Europe, his partner Henry Frick tried to cut workers' wages at Carnegie Steel. The union at the Carnegie plant in Homestead, Pennsylvania, called a strike.

Frick intended to crush the union. On July 1 he called in the Pinkertons, a private police force known for their ability to break strikes. Under cover of darkness, some 300 Pinkertons moved up the Monongahela River on barges. In a shootout with strikers on shore, several people died and many were wounded.

At first Americans generally sympathized with the striking workers. Then, on July 23,



The violence of the Haymarket Riot, depicted here, troubled many Americans. **Culture** Did the incident at Haymarket help or hurt the union cause?

anarchist Alexander Berkman tried and failed to assassinate Frick. Although Berkman was not connected with the strike, the public associated his act with the rising tide of labor violence.

The union admitted defeat and called off the **Homestead Strike** on November 20. 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, kept silent about the entire affair.[†]

Pullman, 1894 Like the strike of 1877, the last of the great strikes also involved the railroad industry. This strike also marked a shift in the federal government's involvement with labor-employer relations.

Sleeping-car maker George Pullman considered himself a caring industrialist. Near Chicago he built a town for his workers that boasted a school, bank, water and gas systems, and comfortable homes. Conditions in the town, however, took a turn for the worse after

[†] Carnegie Steel (and its successor, U.S. Steel) remained nonunionized until the late 1930s.



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.

Government Why did the government interfere with the Pullman Strike?

the Panic of 1893. Pullman laid off workers and cut wages by 25 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. In response Pullman fired three of the workers, causing the local union to go on strike. Pullman refused to bargain and instead shut down the plant. The American Railway Union, led by popular labor organizer Eugene V. Debs, called for a boycott of Pullman cars throughout the country. Widespread local strikes followed.

By June 1894 some 120,000 railway workers had joined in the **Pullman Strike**. Debs instructed strikers not to interfere with the nation's mail, but the strike got out of hand. It completely disrupted western railroad traffic, including delivery of the mail.

Railroad owners turned to the federal government for help, and Attorney General Richard Olney came to their rescue. By arguing that the mail had to get through and citing the Sherman Antitrust Act, Olney won a court order forbidding all union activity that halted railroad traffic. Two days later, on July 4, President Grover Cleveland sent in 2,500 federal troops to ensure that strikers obeyed the court order. A week later the strike was over.

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 approved these appeals, denying unions recognition as legally protected organizations. This official government opposition helped limit union gains for more than 30 years.

SECTION 4 REVIEW

Comprehension

- Key Terms** Define: (a) socialism; (b) collective bargaining; (c) scab; (d) anarchist; (e) Haymarket Riot; (f) Homestead Strike; (g) Pullman Strike.
- Summarizing the Main Idea** Compare the goals and policies of the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor.
- Organizing Information** Create a two-column chart to summarize information about the major strikes of the late 1800s.

Critical Thinking

- Analyzing Time Lines** Review the time line at the start of the section. Which national union

got started in the midst of a period of great turmoil? Explain.

- Making Comparisons** Compare socialism and the labor movement as two different responses to the growing gulf between rich and poor. How did they differ in their proposed solution to the problem?

Writing Activity

- Writing a Persuasive Essay** Write a letter to President Hayes regarding the strike in Martinsburg, West Virginia, in 1877. In your letter, try to persuade the President either to send troops in to stop the strike or to refuse to intervene.