

LABOR CONFLICT IN THE INDUSTRIAL AGE READING

As the American economy became more industrialized, conflict between workers and business owners grew. The nature of the labor conflicts playing out across the country during the late 1800s and early 1900s is characterized in the following events.

Haymarket Affair (1886)

In May 1886, labor unions were striking (refusing to work) throughout the country as they demanded a shorter work day. On May 3, in Chicago, a center of the labor movement, a strike by the Iron Molders' Union was underway at the McCormick Harvesting Machine Company plant, where agricultural machinery was produced. As strikers attempted to prevent strikebreakers (people being employed in the place of those striking) from entering the factory, police opened fire on the strikers, killing four of them.

The next day, a meeting was held in Haymarket Square to protest the killings. As the meeting was coming to a close, city police ordered the crowd to disperse. It was then that someone - whose identity has never been determined - threw a bomb into the crowd, killing several policemen. The panicked police responded by firing into the crowd, killing several more people and wounding many others.

Soon after, with no evidence of who threw the bomb, Chicago officials arrested eight radical leaders. A jury found them guilty, and they were sentenced to death. Four of them were hanged, one died by suicide, and three were later released when a pro-labor governor of Illinois commuted their sentences.

Using the Haymarket Affair to paint the labor movement as dangerous and to advance anti-labor and anti-union sentiments, employers went on the offensive. They blacklisted strikers by adding them to a list that warned other employers not to hire them for supporting unions. They also forced workers to pledge not to join labor organizations as a condition of employment, and used local and private police to break strikes by force and the court system to break them by law.

Homestead Strike (1892)

1892 saw a standoff between one of the nation's leading industrial corporations, the Carnegie Steel Company, and a powerful union representing skilled steel and iron workers, the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers.

Carnegie's steel mills in Homestead, Pennsylvania, were some of the most profitable and technologically advanced in the world. When Andrew Carnegie installed new machinery, changing the steelmaking process, it reduced his dependence on the skilled workers of the steel union. In 1892, he decided he would no longer spare the expense of dealing with the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers, and those who wanted to continue working in his steel mills would have to withdraw their membership from the union. When the workers did not accept another reduction of their wages, the entire workforce was fired. In response, the workers, including the unskilled laborers not included in the Amalgamated Association, called for a strike.

The company had the steel mill fortified with a fence 3 miles long and 12 feet high, topped with barbed wire that included peepholes for rifles to protect the strikebreakers who were brought in to keep the plant running. The strikers blockaded the steelworks. At dawn on July 6, barges carrying armed guards hired by the Pinkerton National Detective Agency to take control of the steelworks approached Homestead by river. The strikers opened fire, and a bloody conflict ensued. The Pinkertons were eventually forced to retreat.

The strikers' victory was short-lived, because four days later, at the company's request, the Governor of Pennsylvania called out the state militia. While the state troops protected the strikebreakers, union leaders were arrested on charges for riot, murder, and treason against the state. After four months and with no resources left, the strikers surrendered. Some agreed to return to work, but their leaders were blacklisted.

In addition to the use of force and the law against the steel workers, Carnegie's other steel plants kept working throughout the Homestead strike. These factors all contributed to the strikers' defeat and the destruction of the Amalgamated Association. As a result, unionization was kept from Carnegie plants well into the twentieth century. Without the organized resistance the steel union had offered, the workers were forced to take wage cuts and increases in hours.

Pullman Strike (1894)

In 1894, workers in the company-owned town of Pullman, Illinois, where railroad sleeping and parlor cars were manufactured, called a strike to protest a reduction in wages. The workers went on strike with the support of the American Railway Union, whose 150,000 members included both skilled and unskilled workers. The ARU announced that its members would refuse to handle trains with Pullman cars. Within a few days, thousands of railroad workers in 27 states and territories were on strike, and this boycott crippled the national rail service.

When the Illinois governor refused to call out the state militia to protect the employers, railroad operators went straight to the federal government, who sent federal troops to occupy railroad centers like Chicago and Sacramento. Violent clashes between troops and workers erupted across the country, leaving 34 dead.

When federal troops failed to get the trains running, President Grover Cleveland's attorney general, Richard Olney, obtained a federal court injunction forbidding the union to continue to strike. When the union's leaders, including Eugene V. Debs, defied the court order, they were arrested and jailed. This caused the strike to collapse. In the case of *In re Debs*, the Supreme Court unanimously confirmed the sentences and approved the use of injunctions against striking labor unions.

Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire (1911)

On March 25, 1911, a fire swept through the Triangle Shirtwaist Company in New York City. The factory, located on the top three floors of a ten-story building, had hundreds of workers. Most of those workers were young immigrant women, who worked in crowded quarters at sewing machines making ladies' clothing for low wages. Those who tried to escape the blaze discovered that the doors to the stairwell had been locked to prevent unauthorized bathroom breaks and other absences. The fire department rushed to the building only to discover that their ladders only reached the sixth floor of the building. As the fire raged, girls who were trapped in the burning building leapt from the upper stories. When the fire had finally been put out, 46 bodies lay on the street, and 100 more were found inside.

During the previous year, when 200 of the workers at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company tried to join the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, the company owners fired them. This

action contributed to the walkout of female garment workers in 1909 known as the Uprising of the 20,000. Among the strikers' demands were better safety measures for factories. By the time the walkout ended in early 1911, the ILGWU had secured union contracts with hundreds of companies. However, the Triangle Shirtwaist Company was not one of them.

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