

THE RISE OF LABOR UNIONS - READING WITH TEACHER'S NOTES

As industrial capitalism transformed the American economy in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the relationship between wage earners and their employers changed along with how people thought about the government's role in regulating the economy. At a time when the government was not involved in regulating the economy, labor unions sought to change that.

Commented [1]: Labor unions wanted to use the power of the government to regulate business.

The emergence of labor unions was one of the most significant public responses to industrialization. The new economic order, created as a result of industrialization, increasingly favored the owners of large corporations at the expense of their workers. These workers were men and women who worked to make a living and provide for their families. The labor movement stemmed from the need to protect the interests of workers against the excessive power of big businesses. Workers were spurred to create trade or labor unions to better advocate for reforms that would improve working conditions by leveraging the collective power of workers.

Finding strength in numbers, labor unions used tactics such as collective bargaining, picketing, closed shops, and strikes to pressure employers to consider the needs and rights of workers. Collective bargaining is the process by which workers, through their unions, negotiate agreements to regulate pay and working conditions. Picketing is a strategy used by workers to inform their employers as well as the public about the realities of their working conditions in hopes of creating pressure that would result in positive change. A "closed shop" means that union membership is required for employment, thus empowering the union by ensuring that all workers are part of the union. The labor unions resorted to strikes mainly when these other tactics failed, and workers felt that the only way to bring their employers to the negotiating table was by threatening their profit margin by refusing to work. Their refusal to work would lead to a halt in the production of goods.

Commented [2]: Labor unions used a variety of tactics to support their goal of protecting workers rights.

One of the earliest national labor unions was the Knights of Labor, which emerged in the 1880s. Diverging from more traditional trade unions, the Knights were the first group to organize unskilled workers as well as skilled workers including women and Black workers. They supported reforms that sought to transform the broader economic system with new laws and practices, including an eight-hour workday, equal pay for equal work, the ending of child labor, and the cooperative ownership of factories.

Commented [3]: The Knights of Labor wanted sought to transform the economic system to treat all workers fairly with laws and practices like the 8 hour work day, equal pay, and ending child labor.

As the influence of the Knights of Labor diminished, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) rose to prominence in the 1890s. As the Homestead and Pullman strikes demonstrated, direct confrontations with big business were not likely to succeed. Founded by Samuel Gompers, the AFL had more practical goals. Rather than trying to overhaul the basic economic system, they utilized collective bargaining to negotiate with employers for a better position within the existing system. They were mainly concerned with higher wages, safer working conditions, and shorter work days. They did not focus on broader injustices, like unequal pay, racial discrimination, and child labor.

Commented [4]: The AFL fought for higher wages, safer working conditions, and shorter work days.

The AFL abandoned the Knights' sense of labor solidarity and restricted their membership to skilled workers only. With the exclusion of unskilled workers, most women, immigrants, and Black workers were left out. Originally, the AFL did not want to be involved in politics, but it came to support political candidates over time. Despite their exclusivity, the AFL saw its membership triple to 1.6 million between 1900 and 1904. The AFL helped to settle hundreds of industrial disputes and encouraged improvements in factory conditions.

Those unionists that rejected the AFL's exclusionary policies formed the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) which solicited new members among the most discriminated-against groups of the workforce: unskilled workers, non-whites, immigrants, women, and migrant workers. Founded by William Haywood, the IWW sought to represent all workers. Members of the IWW believed that capitalist greed had failed American workers, and they called for a socialist revolution. Eugene V. Debs, a founding member of the IWW and leader of the American Socialist Party, argued that "the Industrial Workers are organized not to [appease] but to fight the capitalist class. The capitalists own the tools they do not use, and the workers use the tools they do not own." They wanted to see an economic, political, and social transformation that would empower workers.

Over time, as a result of labor organizations, the power of federal and state governments has been used to safeguard the rights of workers. Additionally, labor unions continue to advocate for the rights of workers by curbing excessive economic and political power in order to ensure greater economic equality.

Sources:

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Zinn, H. (2008). *A people's history of the United States: 1492 - present*. New York: HarperCollins.

Commented [5]: The IWW united all workers, no matter race, gender, ethnicity, or skills in an attempt to change the broader economic system into something that would benefit not only big businesses but workers as well, creating greater economic equality.