THE PROGRESSIVE ERA IN OKLAHOMA

In the late 19th century, Oklahoma—with the rest of the nation—experienced profound economic change with the rise of large, integrated, and powerful business corporations. For most of America's history, a typical business or company was made up of no more than one or two owners managing a few hundred dollars of capital and a few employees. In the 1890s, giant companies worth billions of dollars began forming. These companies employed tens of thousands of people who worked in plants and mines across the nation. In line with national trends, Oklahoma saw its railroad companies, utility companies, and similar entities swiftly combine into massive, powerful corporations.

Many believed that the rapid growth of industrialization caused the spread of poverty and the exploitation of workers and consumers. Additionally, these new businesses were thought to be too powerful, and that if they allied with those in political power, they would destroy traditions of democratic government. From these concerns, the progressive movement began to take shape. Progressive reformers, in Oklahoma and across the nation, sought to harness the power of the national government to eliminate unfair business practices and reduce corruption in government to better protect the rights of average citizens. Generally, progressives fought for reforms aimed at fair wages for labor, decent treatment of workers, protections limiting or prohibiting child labor, and giving voters more significant power in the democratic process.

The Labor Movement in Oklahoma

Progressive ideals were championed in Oklahoma by organized labor groups. The labor movement emerged as interest groups such as miners, railway workers, farmers, and other trade workers began organizing themselves into unions, using their collective power to fight for the reforms they sought.

One of the earliest labor unions, the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), was organized in Indian Territory and led miners in a strike that ultimately resulted in a 1903 agreement with mine operators that guaranteed most of the strikers' demands, including recognition of the union, an eight-hour workday and payment of wages twice a month. Workers who built railroads in Indian Territory also formed unions, such as the Order of Railway Carmen of America, to better advocate for their needs. Additionally, as more farmers faced severe poverty, the farm labor movement grew with the formation groups like the Oklahoma Farmers' Union. This union worked to challenge the inequities in early twentieth-century commercial agriculture by calling for large agricultural corporations to restore land to working farmers. This led to the establishment of publicly owned cooperatives and the abolishment of the crop-lien system that kept many farmers in a cycle of debt. These various labor organizations, recognizing

their capacity to bring about change, began to play an active role in state and local politics before statehood, eventually having a significant influence on the new state's constitution.

Progressive Influence on Politics and the Oklahoma Constitution

As Oklahoma approached statehood, progressives saw an opportunity to influence the makeup of the state Constitution. In 1906, the Oklahoma Enabling Act was passed by the US Congress, authorizing voters of both Indian Territory and Oklahoma Territory to elect delegates to a single convention where they would write Oklahoma's state Constitution. To prepare for the convention, progressives began to organize meetings of various unions and associations.

For example, in 1906, the Oklahoma Federation of Labor, the Oklahoma Farmers' Union, and the railroad organizations each held their conventions in Shawnee, Indian Territory, to discuss provisions they hoped to see addressed in the new state constitution. In September of 1906, according to convention proceeding notes, the Oklahoma Federation of Labor voted "to confer with the Railway Organizations and the Farmers' Union to the end that we may have concerted action in getting articles in the State Constitution for the new state of Oklahoma that will be for our mutual benefit and welfare." These groups jointly released the "Shawnee Demands," a list of twenty-four proposals addressing a variety of social and political issues, especially those regarding the protection of the common people against the interests of large corporations.

Most of the constitutional convention delegates at the time endorsed the Shawnee Demands, ultimately producing a state constitution that included many of the proposals. For example, the political processes of an initiative petition, referendum, and direct primary elections were all written into the new constitution. The initiative petition allows citizens of Oklahoma to propose a new law or constitutional amendment by petitioning (collecting) signatures of a certain number of citizens. Once a sufficient number of signatures are collected, the proposal is placed on the ballot for a vote of the people. Similarly, the referendum is a proposal to repeal (or take away) a law that was previously enacted by the legislature. A referendum is also put on the ballot by citizen petition and then voted on by the people. Direct primaries are held in Oklahoma where a preliminary election in which a party's candidates for public office are nominated by a direct vote of the people. Additionally, provisions calling for an eight-hour workday, a strong corporation commission to regulate utility and railroad companies, an inspector of mines, and restrictions on child labor were all adopted into the Oklahoma Constitution. The inclusion of these provisions and others in Oklahoma's Constitution made it one of the most progressive in the nation.

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