**RISE OF UNIONS** (Source: <https://www.apstudynotes.org/us-history/topics/rise-of-unions/>)

FOCUS QUESTION: How successful was organized labor in improving the position of workers in the period from 1876 to 1900? Analyze the factors that contribute d to the level of success achieved.

**Workers in America**

The new industrial age and the resulting growth of the U.S. economy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries affected nearly everyone in America. Industrial combination and concentration became the norm, with huge trusts appearing in almost every industry. The workplace was changing as machines became common and the demand for unskilled workers brought new groups into the workforce, including immigrants, women, and children. By 1920, nearly 20 percent of all manufacturing workers were women, and 13 percent of all textile workers were younger than 16 years old.

The abundance of laborers available for these unskilled factory jobs made individual workers expendable and led to decreased wages. Most industrial laborers worked at least a ten-hour day, yet earned 20 to 40 percent less than the minimum wage necessary for a decent life. Many Americans feared that the great industrialists were reducing "freemen" to "wage slaves." Class division between the corporate giants and laborers became increasingly apparent throughout America. Little of the fortune that the industrial growth of the nation had generated went to the workers. In 1900, it was estimated that ten percent of Americans owned over three-fourths of the nation’s wealth. Many feared that the United States was on the brink of a disastrous class war.

Health and safety conditions in the workplace were poor and workers had limited recourse. Federal laws offered little protection, and the Sherman Anti-Trust Act was often used to stop the organization of laborers. It was not until the 1930s that the federal government would become actively involved in regulating labor. State and local authorities were usually more responsive to the interests of wealthy industrialists than the needs of laborers.

The social transformation brought on by the new industrial age affected every aspect of life in America. With women toiling alongside men, marriages were often delayed, resulting in smaller families. It was not uncommon for a single company to own an entire town. The company could increase prices at the local grocery store and give laborers easy credit, keeping workers in debt and stuck working at the same low-paying job. The crowded, dirty tenements in these towns led to high disease and death rates.

The workplace became regimented and impersonal. Any time workers would protest the working conditions; corporations would blacklist the uncooperative workers and replace them with workers who would often work for lower pay and without any benefits. Individual workers were not able to battle against the corporate monster. The process of industrialization transformed the nation’s economy and social structure, but in doing so it provoked the emergence of an organized labor movement.

**Union Organizations**

In the 1842 case Commonwealth v. Hunt, the Massachusetts Supreme Court held that it was not illegal for workers to organize a union or try to compel recognition of that union with a strike. This was certainly an important step for labor, but the idea of permanent unions was slow to catch on. Since many laborers were immigrants, they often spoke different languages and harbored racial and cultural biases. Many only planned to stay in America long enough to earn sufficient money to return to their homelands and live comfortably, and therefore saw no point in joining a union. For nearly 20 years after the Commonwealth v. Hunt ruling, labor unions tended to be small and limited to skilled trades.

Eventually, the increase in cost of living after the Civil War, coupled with the rising number of large corporations that decreased wages, lead industrial laborers to organize into unions. In 1866, the first national coalition of these unions was founded—The National Labor Union.

The struggle for the right to unionize was a remarkable event in the history of the United States labor movement. It not only involved overcoming resistance from the corporations, but also cultural divisions within the working class itself. The National Labor Union consisted of delegates from labor and reform groups who supported an eight-hour workday, arbitration of industrial disputes, and inflationary greenbacks—the printing of paper money to expand the supply of currency and relieve debtors.

The National Labor Union lasted approximately six years and attracted nearly 600,000 members. It included skilled and unskilled laborers, farmers, and some women and blacks, but excluded the Chinese. The depression of the 1870s, along with the sudden death of its leader, put an end to the union. During its existence, the union persuaded Congress to enact an eight-hour workday for federal employees and to repeal the Contract Labor Law (a law that was passed during the Civil War to encourage importation of labor). Many industrialists had employed the Contract Labor Law to recruit immigrants who were willing to work for lower wages than Americans.

Another national union group emerged in 1869 called the Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor. The organization was founded by Uriah S. Stephens and a group of Philadelphia garment workers. Stephens made the Knights a secret organization with an elaborate initiation ritual, which kept membership to a minimum until his successor, Terence V. Powderly, discarded secrecy. At that time membership increased greatly.

In a step that resembles modern industrial unionism, the Knights of Labor welcomed both skilled and unskilled laborers, blacks (though mostly in segregated locals), women, and immigrants (excluding Chinese). The Knights upheld reform measures that had been endorsed by previous unions (eight-hour workday, greenbacks, producers’ cooperatives, codes for safety and health, etc.), and were ahead of their time when they called for equal pay for equal work by men and women. The group rejected the suggestion that laborers would forever remain wage earners, and instead encouraged the idea that by joining together working people could advance up the corporate ladder.

In 1885, the Knights of Labor staged a successful strike over Jay Gould’s Wabash Railroad. Gould had cut workers’ wages and a strike on his railroad lines led to Gould restoring the wage cuts. This victory helped to increase membership, and by 1886 the Knights of Labor surpassed 700,000 members. The Knights had reached their peak, and closely after they went into rapid decline. One historical interpretation is that the Knights of Labor failed in part because they tried to be all things to all working-class people.

In 1886, there was a great upheaval of labor and the Knights became involved in several May Day strikes, which included several hundred thousand workers across the country. In Chicago about 80,000 workers were involved in a strike for the eight-hour workday. Tension built between the strikers and the police, and during a clash at McCormick Harvester Company one striker was killed.

Coincidentally, Chicago was home to an active group of anarchists who tried to take advantage of the excitement to win support for their cause. On May 4, 1886, the day after the McCormick incident, anarchists gathered at Haymarket Square to protest the killing and other brutalities by the authorities during the May Day strikes. Chicago police arrived to break up the meeting. A bomb was thrown into the crowd and gunfire ensued, killing several policemen and civilians and wounding approximately 100. Panic seized the city and several anarchists were arrested, although there was never any evidence linking them to the bomb-throwing.

One of the anarchists held a membership card in the Knights of Labor, which provoked widespread antipathy against the Knights and labor groups in general. No direct tie could be proven between the Knights and the anarchists or between the Knights and the bombing, but the public tended to associate the Knights with violence and radicalism from then on. Subsequent strikes by the Knights were unsuccessful. By the 1890s, the Knights of Labor had only 100,000 members who ultimately left to join other protest groups, so that by 1893 the union had dissolved. One of the lasting achievements of the Knights was their drafting a bill that resulted in the creation of the Federal Bureau of Labor Statistics in 1884.

The labor movement in general was still gaining strength, and various craft unions began to organize. An association of national craft unions called the American Federation of Labor (AFL) was established in 1886. The AFL was an alliance that unified the strategy for various independent self-governing national unions. Samuel Gompers, a cigar maker who came to America as a teenager, served as president of the AFL every year except for one until he died in 1924.

Gompers did not become involved with politics or champion utopian ideas like other union leaders, instead he focused on concrete economic gains for AFL members. The AFL generally believed that most workers would remain laborers their whole lives, and so tried to create a sense of pride in their skills and jobs. Rather than open its membership to all, the AFL allowed only skilled workers to enter the union. The federation worked for things like employers’ liability, mine-safety laws, favorable trade agreements, closed shops (shops that could only hire union members), increased wages, and above all, a standard eight-hour workday. Since the AFL focused on a select number of basic goals, it was sometimes called a “bread and butter” union.

Gompers and the AFL members used walkouts, boycotts, and negotiations to achieve their goals. A strike fund collected from workers’ dues enabled the AFL members to strike for extended periods of time and still get paid. This put more pressure on management to negotiate fair deals with workers. Gompers’ approach to labor problems resulted in solid growth for the AFL. By 1900, unions with a total of about 500,000 members formed the federation, and by 1920 it reached a peak of four million members.

Over the years, the public tired of the frequent union strikes and was often unsympathetic to the workers’ plight since strikes disrupted their daily lives. However, in the early 1900s, attitudes toward labor slowly changed as people began to understand the workers’ need to organize, bargain, and strike.

**Major Strikes**

The end of the nineteenth century saw the most contentious and violent labor conflicts in the history of the nation. Between 1881 and 1900, approximately 23,000 strikes occurred, involving over six million workers. Unfortunately, in about half of the strikes the laborers gained nothing, and in the other half they were only able to elicit meager or modest gains. Bloody confrontations wracked the railroad, steel, and mining industries, often requiring intervention with federal troops or local militia.

One of the first great labor conflicts occurred in the early 1870s in the anthracite coal region of Pennsylvania. Conditions in the coal mines were dangerous, with inadequate safety provisions and ventilation. A group of primarily Irish miners in Pennsylvania organized into a union. The members of this union were called the Molly Maguires.

The miners grew increasingly frustrated with the horrendous conditions, while the mine owners ignored the problem. The situation continued to deteriorate with both sides eventually resorting to violence. The Molly Maguires often used intimidation, beatings, arson, and killings to fight for better working conditions and protest the mine owners’ denial of their right to unionize. Mine owners intimidated miners into submission by maiming and killing those suspected of union participation. The struggle reached its peak in 1874-75, and the mine owners hired the Pinkerton Detective Agency to stifle the miners’ struggle.

The Pinkerton detectives gathered enough evidence concerning the criminal activities of the Molly Maguires to indict the leaders. Approximately 20 members went to trial in 1876 and were convicted, and some of them were hanged. The Molly Maguires became martyrs for labor, inspiring other labor groups to form.

A more widespread labor struggle was the Great Railroad Strike of 1877. In America’s first nationwide strike, rail workers ceased working in response to a 10 percent pay cut by the four largest railroads. Workers walked off the job and blockaded freight trains near Baltimore and in West Virginia, allowing only passenger traffic to get through.

Attempts to break the strike only led to rioting and sympathy walkouts. Nearly 100,000 workers were idled and approximately two-thirds of the railroad mileage across the Unites States was shut down with over 14 states and ten railroads involved. Violent strikes quickly broke out from Maryland to California, killing over 100 people and destroying millions of dollars in property.

Eventually President Hayes sent federal troops to restore order in the cities with the worst uprisings. The workers, never able to fully organize themselves, slowly went back to work. The strike inspired support for the Greenback-Labor Party in 1878 and Workingmen’s Parties in the 1880s. It had been one of the most violent and destructive strikes in America’s history, yet few gains were realized by the workers.

Two other violent incidents stalled the emerging industrial union movement in the 1890s. During contract talks at Andrew Carnegie’s Homestead steel plant in 1892, plant manager Henry C. Frick proposed a wage cut. Negotiations broke down and the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers went on strike. Frick proceeded to lock them out and hired 300 Pinkerton detectives to guard the plant. Workers and townspeople confronted the detectives and a battle broke out, leaving a handful of detectives and workers dead and over 60 wounded.

The Pennsylvania governor called in the state militia to establish peace, and non-union scabs replaced the workers. Scores of workers were indicted on 167 counts of murder, rioting, and conspiracy, but eventually a jury found the union leaders innocent. Unions were not allowed back in the Homestead plant until 1937. The outcome of the Homestead strike demonstrated that a strong employer could break a union if it hired a mercenary police force and gained government and court protection.

In 1894, one of the most notable walkouts in history occurred in Pullman, Illinois, where the Pullman Palace Car Company housed its employees. George Pullman was hit hard by the depression and decided to cut wages 25-40 percent, but he maintained rent prices for company housing.

Many Pullman workers joined the American Railway Union, founded by Eugene V. Debs. The workers, backed by Debs, tried to negotiate with Pullman to no avail. The workers went on strike refusing to handle Pullman cars, which shut down most of the railroads in the Midwest. The U.S. Attorney General, Richard Olney, stepped in and urged President Cleveland to dispatch federal troops to break the strike. Olney’s rationale was that the strikers were interfering with transit of U.S. mail, since Pullman cars were connected to mail cars.

President Cleveland ordered troops to Illinois, and the federal courts issued an injunction forbidding any interference with the mail, citing the Sherman Anti-Trust Act to support the injunction.

Involvement of federal troops resulted in a spread of violence to several states and rioting ensued. The Pullman strike was crushed, but the fighting left 34 dead. Eugene Debs and his aides were arrested and spent six months in jail for ignoring the injunction. During his time in jail, Debs made a political conversion to socialism. The Pullman strike represented the first time the government used an injunction to break a strike, which left many workers wary that an alliance between big business and the courts had become official.