

Workers' Problems and Solutions

In the 1700s, most people were farmers; but by 1880, almost five million Americans worked in manufacturing, construction, and transportation. This change in work resulted in two kinds of problems for many workers—problems with low wages and problems with unsafe working conditions.

Workers' Problems

Low wages. As companies grew larger in the late 1800s, the owners of the companies lost contact with the people who worked for them. The owners of big factories would often never know most of the people who worked for them. They had little concern for the problems of their workers.

Most owners of big businesses were concerned with making a good profit. Owners wanted to pay their workers as little as possible because if production costs were too high, a business could have difficulty competing with other companies. Because there were often many more people who wanted jobs than there were available jobs, big business owners could reduce the pay of their workers.

A person's standard of living is determined by how much money that person can spend on things such as housing, clothing, food, medical care, and recreation. We say that a person has a low standard of living when that person can afford only crowded, run-down housing, cannot buy enough food or clothing, and cannot afford medical care. A person with a very high standard of living could afford a large new home, new clothes, plenty of food, and the best medical care.

17. What determines a person's standard of living?

Many workers in the late 1800s had a very low standard of living as a result of their low wages. As immigrants and people from rural areas moved to the city to obtain work in the factories, housing shortages occurred. With the great demand for living space, landlords would divide houses into a number of small apartments. Many workers could not afford to rent apartments for their families, so several families would often join together to pay the rent and live together in crowded, unsafe housing. Few of these houses had adequate plumbing or ventilation. Disease spread easily. The low-income workers often did not have enough money for adequate food or clothing, and few could afford medical care. Even though the country was becoming more wealthy and the salaries of some workers might increase over the years, more immigrants arrived who would work for very low wages.

18. How did low wages affect workers' standard of living?

Unsafe working conditions. As industrialization increased and the machinery used by workers became more powerful, work became more dangerous. Thousands of workers were killed each year in industrial accidents and tens of thousands of workers were injured. For example, in one year at Armour's meatpacking plant in Chicago, over 2,000 workers were injured or became ill from their work. Workers also had to work long hours. Twelve and thirteen hour workdays were common. Some railroad workers had to work as many as 40 hours before getting any time to rest. The long hours that workers put in made them tired and resulted in more accidents.

19. Describe the working-condition problems many workers had.

"... I regard my people [workers] as I regard my machinery. So long as they can do my work for what I choose to pay them, I keep them, getting all I can."

A factory owner

"Each one of the hundreds of parts of a mowing machine was made separately, and sometimes handled by hundreds of men. Where Jurgis worked there was a machine which cut and stamped a certain piece of steel about two square inches in size; the pieces came tumbling out upon a tray, and all that human hands had to do was pile them in regular rows, and change the trays at intervals. This was done by a single boy, who stood with eyes and thoughts centered upon it, and fingers flying so fast that the sounds of the bits of steel striking upon each other was like the music of an express train as one hears it in a sleeping car at night . . . Thirty thousand of these pieces he handles every day, nine or ten millions every year—how many in a lifetime it rested with the gods to say. Near by him sat men bending over whirling grindstones, putting the finishing touches to the steel knives of the reaper, picking them out of a basket with the right hand, pressing first one side and then the other against the stone, and finally dropping them with the left hand into another basket. One of these men told Jurgis that he had sharpened three thousand pieces of steel a day for thirteen years."

Upton Sinclair
The Jungle

Discussion

Why do you think business owners were unconcerned about workers and poor working conditions?

ngle town. In 1825, The United Tailoresses of New York City went on strike demanding higher wages. They were forced back to work and their leaders were arrested and blacklisted. When a person was blacklisted, employers gave their names to other employers so that the blacklisted person could not get a job.

24. What happens to a person who is blacklisted?

Sometimes unions would join together to gain more power. In 1835, there were 50 different trade unions organized just in the city of Philadelphia. Most of them joined in a strike and succeeded in getting a ten-hour workday. In 1835, workers in 25 mills in New Hampshire went on strike and got their workday reduced from 13.5 hours to 12-hour days.

The largest strike before the Civil War was by the shoemakers in Lynn, Massachusetts. Their strike for higher wages spread to surrounding towns. State militia were brought in to protect the factories so that companies could continue making and shipping shoes. After over two months, the strikers finally got a small increase in wages. However, the companies refused to recognize their union, meaning that workers were not able to negotiate with the employers on a regular basis.

25. Why did unions sometimes join together in strikes?

Resistance to Unions

The early strikes by unions had made three things clear to the workers. First, businesses would oppose all attempts by the workers to gain power by striking. Business owners would oppose strikes by firing union workers, blacklisting their leaders, and requiring workers to sign yellow dog contracts. A **yellow dog contract** was a promise by the worker not to join a union.

26. What is a yellow dog contract?

Second, it was clear that the government would support the business owners and not help the workers. State governments would send in soldiers to stop strikes. The courts would help by ruling against the workers and the unions. For example, if a worker broke a contract promising that he would work one year, the worker did not get any pay, even for work already completed. In Massachusetts, a judge decided that a worker, by agreeing to work for a company, was also agreeing to take risks. If the worker was injured on the job, he was not allowed to collect any money from the company.

Third, it was clear to workers that isolated local unions representing workers in a single factory did not have the power to stand up to the owners or managers. Unions would have to get more members if they were going to dominate big business owners.

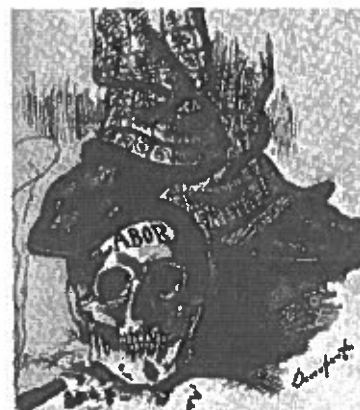
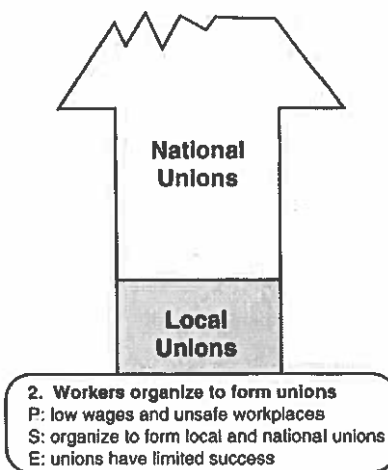
27. What three things did workers realize about their attempts to gain power?

National Labor Unions

In the late 1860s, different unions began to cooperate so that they could get more power. These unions cooperated in one of two ways. Some unions joined together to represent workers who worked for the same type of company, such as all the railroad workers or all the steel workers. Other unions tried to include many different types of workers from across the nation.

These unions tried to gain power for the workers in two different ways. Some unions decided to try accommodation to solve their problem by pressuring the government to make laws that helped workers. Other unions decided to keep using strikes to gain domination over employers.

28. What are the two ways that unions tried to organize on a national level?



Mr. Hanna's Stand on the Labor Question



Worker's Parade during Packinghouse Strike, 1904

the new immigrants. The union went on strike. During the strike, the Mollies damaged company equipment and even killed some of their bosses. Eventually the leaders of the Molly Maguires were arrested and executed.

34. Who were the Molly Maguires?

Pittsburgh rail strike. Business owners and managers became increasingly concerned about union strikes in the late 1870s when railroad workers shut down nearly two-thirds of the railroads in the United States. In 1877, the worst year of the depression that had started in 1873, the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad Company and several other railroads announced that they were going to cut workers' wages by 10 percent. Workers on the Baltimore and Ohio railroad took over the rail yards and prevented trains from leaving. Workers on other railroads did the same. In Pittsburgh, workers on the Pennsylvania Railroad blocked all the tracks. The state militia was sent in, violence erupted, and 26 Pennsylvania Railroad workers were killed.

Within days, thousands of railroad workers across the East and Midwest blocked other railroads. Battles between workers and police erupted in cities across the country. Hundreds of workers were killed. Eventually, the U.S. government sent federal troops to several cities to stop the union activities and to get the railroads running. The Pittsburgh Rail Strike of 1877 was important for two reasons. It marked the first national strike by railroad workers. Also, it was the first use of federal troops to put down a union strike.

35. Give two reasons why the Pittsburgh Rail Strike of 1877 was an important event.

36. What started the Pittsburgh Rail Strike of 1877?

American Federation of Labor. In 1886, the next workers' organization that became a national force, the American Federation of Labor, was formed by a combination of over 20 national craft unions. A craft union represents workers who have particular skills, such as plumbers, shoemakers, and carpenters. The American Federation of Labor (AFL) was headed by Samuel Gompers. Samuel Gompers had previously organized workers in "sweatshops" in New York City. Sweatshops were factories in which people manufactured clothing. These factories were usually in closed, unventilated spaces that got very hot in the summer, giving them the name sweatshop.

The unions in the AFL avoided politics and concentrated on issues that directly affected workers, such as the length of the work day, higher wages, and safety conditions. The AFL used strikes to gain their demands. The AFL did not concern itself with the problems of the most needy workers. The craft unions that formed the AFL had a membership mostly of white male workers who had been born in the United States. The AFL did not seek to get other types of workers. The AFL was somewhat successful in getting improved wages and safer working conditions for its highly skilled members. The AFL had about 150,000 members in 1886 and grew to over two million members by 1901.

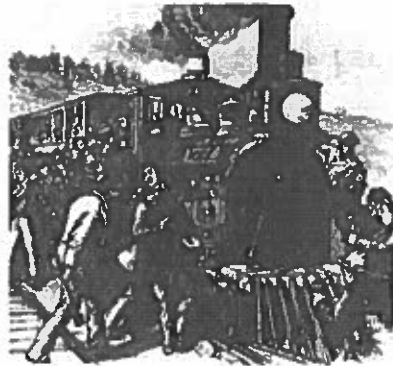
37. What kind of workers belonged to the AFL?

Discussion How was the AFL different from National Labor Union?

Homestead Steel strike. In 1892, a new manager at the Carnegie Homestead Steel Plant in Pittsburgh wanted to get rid of the Iron and Steel Workers Union. He broke the company's wage agreement with the workers and lowered their wages. The workers went on strike and the plant was shut down. Striking workers occupied the factory while their supporters surrounded the factory. A battle erupted between strikers and Pinkerton detectives who



National Eight Hour Day



Strikers stop a train



Samuel Gompers

s workers tried to improve working conditions and secure wages to obtain a decent standard of living. Unions were successful in solving the workers' problems only when the workers had high skills, and there were few workers with those skills. Nevertheless, unions helped other workers by bringing attention to their low wages and poor working conditions. Unions benefited some workers, even non-union members, by pressuring businesses to improve wages and working conditions.

46. Unions were successful in solving problems for what kind of workers?

47. How did unions help other workers?

One reason that unions did not have much success is that most workers did not belong to a union. Out of 17 million workers in 1900, no more than three million were union members. Some workers did not join a union because they believed, as the settlers had, that each person had to take care of himself. Other workers did not join a union because they were afraid that they would lose their job. Employers could fire union workers and blacklist them. Employers could require that workers sign yellow dog contracts before they were hired.

Immigrants were often unlikely to become union members. They were not sure how long they would remain in America. African Americans were not allowed to join most unions, and as a result, many African American men worked as strikebreakers. **Strikebreakers** are people who work for a business when the regular workers are on strike. Business owners hire strikebreakers so that the business can keep making products and not lose money during a strike. Some unions that did allow African Americans, such as the miners, meatpackers, and longshoremen, African Americans became loyal union members. However, by not including immigrants, unskilled workers, and African Americans, most unions lost many potential members. Not until the 1930s did new unions work successfully to include African Americans, Mexican Americans, and unskilled workers. This movement was started by John L. Lewis and the United Mine Workers.

48. Why did many African Americans work as strikebreakers?

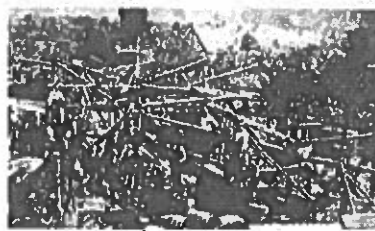
49. What is one reason why unions were not successful?

50. What are some reasons why workers did not join the unions?

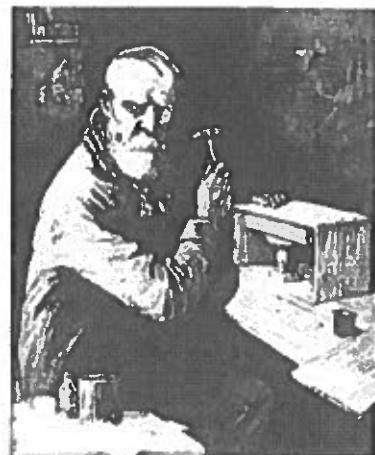
A second reason the unions did not have much success is that legislators did not pass any effective laws that helped solve the workers' problems. Only a few early unions, like the National Labor Union and the Knights of Labor, even managed to get legislation passed. In Pennsylvania, a law was passed to make mines safer, but the legislation was not enforced. In 1890, Illinois passed legislation that allowed state inspectors to examine factory working conditions. However, the first factory inspector, Florence Kelley, was primarily concerned with overwork and physical danger to women. Workers realized that big business influenced the state and federal government to work against any legislation that would improve working conditions.

51. What is another reason why unions did not have much success?

The third reason that unions did not succeed was that the courts supported big business owners. In 1890, Congress passed the Sherman Antitrust Act, which had originally been intended to prevent big corporations from limiting competition. However, the Supreme Court used the antitrust parts of the Act against the unions. When unions went on strike, business owners would go to court. The courts said that the strike violated the Sherman Antitrust Act because unions had a monopoly of workers and the strike limited trade. The



Oil Workers



Wood worker



People moving into shantytown on Chicago's lakefront