

Chapter 3 Lesson 4

Unions

Why did unions begin?

- 1) Workers worked in very difficult conditions. They were exposed to toxic chemicals, long hours, and workplace injuries.
- 2) Pay rose dramatically, however there was a large income gap between the workers and the owners of the companies.
- 3) In the late 1800's, deflation occurred. This actually raised the purchasing power of the workers. Companies cut wages during this same period but prices continued to fall. Although the workers were in a better financial position, they were frustrated by the falling wages.

These conditions convinced workers that they needed a union to bargain for better conditions and wages.

Early Unions

The early unions were trade unions (craft unions). Craft workers were more highly trained and had specialized skills. They were paid higher wages than unskilled workers (common laborers). One early example of a trade union was the Knights of St. Crispin (shoemakers' union).

Opposition

Employers had to negotiate with trade unions because the workers the unions represented were skilled, necessary workers. But the employers viewed the unions in a negative light. They were especially opposed to industrial unions (represented all workers in an industry, skilled and unskilled).

Companies tried to prevent unions from developing.

- 1) Worker oaths
- 2) Firing striking workers
- 3) Used detectives to identify leaders/organizers
- 4) Lockouts: workers were locked out of work and were not paid
- 5) Hired strikebreakers (scabs)

There were no laws protecting workers and laws allowing membership in unions. Courts often sided with the companies not the unions in lawsuits.

Unions were also perceived as being un-American. Many associated the labor unions with the ideas of Karl Marx. Marx characterized capitalism as formed by a class struggle between the workers and the owners. Marx believed that the workers would rise up in protest and revolution and overthrow capitalism and the government leaving communism in its place. Some union supporters were followers of Marx while others were anarchists. Anarchists believe that there is no need for government and had begun protests and violence in Europe in an effort to begin a revolution. America had also just gone

through a period of heavy European immigration. Many Americans were resentful of or hostile to immigrants and associated them with radical political ideas. These factors led many Americans to be suspicious of unions.

Struggling to Organize

Workers had tried to create industrial unions in the past but had failed. Sometimes it even led to violence and bloodshed.

- 1) The Great Railroad Strike: In 1877 (following the Panic of 1873), the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad decided to cut wages again. The first workers to respond were in Martinsburg, West Virginia. They left work and blocked the tracks. Railroad workers around the country responded by walking off the job. Around 80,000 workers and 2/3's of America's railways were involved. Workers tore up tracks, damaged equipment and blocked tracks. Several governors called out the militia and gun fights erupted. President Hayes declared a "state of insurrection" and sent federal troops. After 12 days, over 100 people were dead and millions worth of railroad equipment was damaged.
- 2) The Knights of Labor: founded in 1869 by Terrence Powderly. His main concept was to use arbitration and boycotts instead of strikes. The Knights were also different in that they allowed women and African Americans. Their main goals were the eight hour work day, equal pay for women and worker owned factories.
- 3) The Haymarket Riot: 1886, supporters of the 8 hour work day called for a nationwide strike. After 2 days, violence broke out in Chicago and four people died. The shootings brought about a massive protest in Haymarket Square. During the protest someone threw a bomb and both police and workers fired their weapons. When it was over 170 or more were injured and 10 policemen were killed. Eight men were arrested and four of them were executed. Opponents of the unions used this to hurt the unions' reputations. And the Knights reputation was destroyed when one of the arrested men turned out to be a member of the Knights.
- 4) Homestead Strike: 1892, strike at Carnegie's Homestead steel mill. The mill was managed by Henry Clay Frick. Frick cut wages and proposed more cuts. He locked out employees (union members) and hired the Pinkerton Detective Agency to bring in scabs or strikebreakers. As the Pinkertons tried to bring in the strikebreakers, violence broke out. After several hours, several were dead and many were injured. The government moved in to protect the strikebreakers and later the strike failed.
- 5) Pullman Strike: 1894, (Pullman Palace Car Company) workers' wages were cut while prices stayed the same. The workers who were members of the ARU refused to handle Pullman cars, the railroads came to a standstill. Then the railroad managers had mail cars attached to Pullman cars, this led to the involvement of President Cleveland. He sent in federal troops to protect the mail and ensure its' movement. Later the strike and the ARU failed.

New Unions Emerge

New types of unions began to emerge to help the unskilled workers, while trade unions represented skilled workers.

The AFL (American Federation of Labor)

The AFL emerged in 1886 led by Samuel Gompers. The AFL combined several trade unions together and became the largest single union in the US. The focus of the AFL was on wages, hours and conditions. Gompers would strike but considered negotiation the better first option. The AFL had 3 main goals

- 1) Convince companies to recognize unions and collective bargain
- 2) Use of closed shops
- 3) The 8 hour work day

The IWW (Industrial Workers of the World)

The IWW was created in 1905 by a group of labor radical, many of whom were socialists. They wanted unions organized by industry not skill level. The IWW did have one successful strike in 1912 (textile workers in Massachusetts). However, their numbers never grew, primarily due to the radical connections and controversial strikes.

Women and organized labor

Women were beginning to work more in the period after the Civil War but they were paid less than men in the same job and most unions would not allow them to be members. Mary Harris Jones (Mother Jones) was a prominent labor leader of the day. She was a labor organizer for the Knights of Labor, and then organized mine workers.

The ILGWU (International Ladies' Garment Workers Union) was organized in 1900 by a group of Jewish and Italian immigrants. This union represented both male and female workers in the ladies' garment industry. The ILGWU later, through a strike, won better conditions, better wages and benefits.

WTUL (Women's Trade Union League)

The WTUL was founded by Mary O'Sullivan, Leonora O'Reilly, Jane Addams and Lillian Wald. They worked for minimum wages, 8 hour work day, no evening work for women and the end of child labor.