THE STRUGGLE OF ORGANIZED LABOR

The late 19th century witnessed the most violent labor conflicts in the nation’s history as so common were striking workers battling police & state militia that many feared the U.S. was heading to class warfare between capital & labor

INDUSTRIAL WARFARE
- With a surplus of cheap labor, management held most of the power in its struggles with organized labor
- Strikers could easily be replaced by bringing in strikebreakers, or scabs who were unemployed persons desperate for jobs
- Employers also sued all of the following tactics for defeating unions:
  1. THE LOCKOUT: Closing the factory to break a labor movement before it could get organized
  2. BLACKLISTS: Names of pro-union workers circulated among employers
  3. YELLOW-DOG CONTRACTS: Workers being told, as a condition for employment, that they must sign an agreement not to join a union
  4. PRIVATE GUARDS & STATE MILITIA: Were called in to put down strikes
  5. COURT INJUNCTIONS: Were obtained to stop strikes
- Management fostered public fear of unions as anarchistic and un-American
- Before 1900, it won most of its battles with organized labor because, if violence developed, employers could almost always count on the support of the federal and state governments
- Labor was often divided on the best methods for fighting management as some union leaders advocated political action
- Other leaders favored direct confrontation like strikes, picketing, boycotts, & slowdowns to achieve union recognition & collective bargaining

GREAT RAILROAD STRIKE OF 1877
- One of the worst outbreaks of labor violence in the century erupted in 1877, during an economic depression, when the railroad companies cut wages in order to reduce costs
- A strike on the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad quickly spread across 11 states and shut down 66% of the country’s railroads
- Railroad workers were joined by 500,000 workers from other industries in an escalating strike that was quickly becoming national in scale
- For the first time since the 1830s, a president (Rutherford Hayes) used federal troops to end labor violence
- The strike & the violence finally ended, but not before more than 100 people had been killed
- After the strike, some employers addressed the workers’ grievances by improving wages and working conditions, while others took a hard line by busting workers’ organizations

ATTEMPTS TO ORGANIZE NATIONAL UNIONS

Before the Civil War, unions had been organized as local associations of craft workers (ex. Philadelphia shoemakers, New York printers)

NATIONAL LABOR UNION
- The first attempt to organize all workers in all states (skilled & unskilled), (agricultural & industrial workers) was the National Labor Union
- Founded in 1866, it had 640,000 members in two years
- Besides the goals of higher wages and the 8-hour day, they wanted equal rights for women & blacks, monetary reform & worker cooperatives
- Its chief victory was winning the 8-hour day for workers employed by the federal government
- It lost support, however, after a depression began in 1873, and after the unsuccessful strikes of 1877

KNIGHTS OF LABOR
- A second national labor union, the Knights of Labor began in 1869 as a secret society in order to avoid detection by employers
- Under the leadership of Terence Powderly, the union went public in 1881, opening its membership to all workers, including blacks & women
- He wanted reforms like worker cooperatives to make each man his own employer, abolition of child labor & abolition of monopolies/trusts
- He favored settling labor disputes by means of arbitration rather than resorting to strikes
- Because the Knights of Labor were loosely organized, he could not control local units that decided to strike
- The Knights of Labor grew rapidly in the early 1880s and attained a peak membership of 730,000 workers in 1886
- It declined after the violence of the Haymarket Riot in Chicago in 1886 turned public opinion against the union

HAYMARKET RIOT BOMBING:
- Chicago, with about 80,000 Knights in 1886, was the site of the first May Day labor movement
- Also living in Chicago were about 200 anarchists who advocated the violent overthrow of all government
- In response to the movement calling for a general strike to achieve an 8-hour day, violence broke out at Chicago’s McCormick Harvester Plant
- On May 4, workers held a public meeting in Haymarket Square, and as police attempted to break up the meeting, someone threw a bomb, which killed 7 police officers as the bomb thrower was never found
- Eight anarchist leaders were tried for the crime and seven were sentenced to death
- Horrified by the bomb incident, many Americans concluded that the union movement was radical and violent
- The Knights of Labor, as the most visible union at the time, lost popularity and membership
AMERICAN FEDERATION OF LABOR
- Unlike the idealistic, reform-minded Knights of Labor, the American Federation of Labor (AF of L) concentrated on attaining economic goals
- Founded in 1886 as an association of 25 craft unions, the AF of L did not advocate a reform program to remake American society
- Samuel Gompers, who led the union from 1886 to 1924, went after the basics of higher wages and improved working conditions
- He directed his local unions of skilled workers to walk out until the employer agreed to negotiate a new contract through collective bargaining
- By 1901, the AF of L was by far the nation’s largest union, with 1 million members
- Even this union, however, would not achieve major successes until the early decades of the 20th century

STRIKEBREAKING IN THE 1890S
Two massive strikes in the 1890s showed the growing discontent of labor & the power of management to prevail in industrial disputes

1. HOMESTEAD STRIKE
- Henry Clay Frick, the manager of Andrew Carnegie’s Homestead Steel plant near Pittsburgh, precipitated a strike in 1892 by cutting wages 20%
- Frick used the weapons of the lockout, private guards, & strikebreakers to defeat the steelworkers’ walkout after 5 months
- The failure of the Homestead Strike set back the union movement in the steel industry until the New Deal in the 1930s

2. PULLMAN STRIKE
- Even more alarming to conservatives was a strike of workers living in George Pullman’s model company town near Chicago
- Pullman manufactured the famous railroad sleeping cars that bore his name
- In 1894, he announced a general cut in wages and fired the leaders of the worker’s delegation that came to bargain with him
- The workers at Pullman laid down their tools and appealed for help from the American Railroad Union whose leader, Eugene Debs, directed railroad workers not to handle any trains with Pullman cars
- The union’s boycott tired up rail transportation across the country
- Railroad owners supported Pullman by linking Pullman cars to mail trains
- Railroad owners appealed to President Grover Cleveland, persuading him to use the army to keep the mail trains running
- A federal court issued an injunction forbidding interference with the operation of the mails and ordering railroad workers to abandon the boycott & the strike
- For failing to respond to this injunction, Eugene Debs & other union leaders were arrested and jailed as this effectively ended the strike
- In “In re Debs” (1895), the Supreme Court approved using court injunctions against strikes, which gave employers a weapon to break unions
- After serving a 6-month jail sentence, Eugene Debs concluded that more radical solutions were needed to cure labor’s problems
- Eugene Debs turned to socialism and the American Socialist Party, which he helped to found in 1900

ORGANIZED LABOR BY 1900
- By 1900, only 3% of American workers belonged to unions
- Management held the upper hand in labor disputes, with government generally taking its side
- However, some of the public were beginning to recognize the need for a better balance between the demands of employers and employees to avoid the numerous strikes and violence that characterized the late 19th century