The Rise of Unions and Labor Activism

Paul A. Bishop

Introduction

The Second Industrial Revolution that swept across the United States in the later part of the 19th century was carried along by the development of a national communications system in the form of the telegraph system, and the advent of a railroad network that created a national transportation system. This in turn led to the growth of larger and larger businesses toward the end of the century. This would soon lead to the formation of growing corporations as states moved to attract.

Before the growth of corporations, the average business was generally a local operation with some operating on a regional level, or within a given state at best. Businesses usually operated close to their suppliers and local markets, being constrained by the need to communicate quickly between factories and the ability to transport their products. The development of the telegraph (and later the telephone) and the national railroad system rapidly changed this in the 19th century. Now, business could be operated at ever increasing distances as the opportunity to expand became a profitable reality.

The larger businesses soon took advantage of this opportunity to expand their markets and grew into corporations as their access to capital allowed them to do so. This expansion immediately gave rise to the need for larger work forces in the form of labor. As businesses grew, so did their demand for larger manufacturing facilities and therefore their need for larger work forces. Beyond expanding their markets, manufacturing facilities and labor would become the largest expenditures of businesses, and would be where they would look to cut costs. This would quickly begin to create problems for both the corporations and their employees.
The Expansion of American Corporations

The early “charter companies” of the 17\textsuperscript{th} century were the forerunners of the corporations that would develop in the United States in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. These were groups of individuals that pooled their resources to gather the capital necessary to operate their businesses on an international scale. Known as “joint stock companies”, investors would hold shares equivalent to their monetary investments. Under the mercantile system of the 17\textsuperscript{th} century, these early corporations would be sanctioned by the monarchs and governments of their various countries. They would then compete with one another for lucrative royal contracts that in many instances created monopolies in their particular businesses. In some cases, the shareholders could realize a double return on their investments.

Government chartering was prevalent well into the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, but in the United States its use began to diminish as corporate law was geared toward the interest of the public at that time. For this reason, many private companies avoided using a corporate model, and instead gravitated toward creating “limited partnerships”. As this reduced state revenues, states began to introduce less restrictive corporate laws in an effort to attract more business. In 1819, the United States Supreme Court ruled favorably on a series of cases granting corporations expanded rights and exemptions. Among these was the concept of “limited liability”, whereby a company could contain its legal liability against claims by registering as a “limited company”. In essence, a corporation was by law now an “artificial person” whose liability for damages was limited to the corporation itself. This absolved the owners, managers, and investors of most of the monetary responsibility for any legal damages. Damages could now only be sought from the “assets” of the company, protecting the personal property of the company’s owners, managers, and investors.

Corporations then began to flourish in the United States as the availability of expanding domestic markets presented themselves. By the end of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, deregulation, increasing availability of capital, limited liability, and expanding markets came together to initiate an explosion of corporations. What were once local and state-wide companies, now began to expand into the greater parts of the United States. The advent of the telegraph and later the telephone, coupled with the railroads became the catalyst for national corporate expansion.

Expansion of Factories

What began to drive the economic engine that became big business in the United States? Once the availability of national domestic markets for goods became a reality, and many of the legal restraints had been remove, corporations rapidly move to expand. As the demand for their products increased, the need to build ever larger manufacturing facilities was realized. The
demand for mass produced products would require a manufacturing process that was beyond the scope of “piece work”. This refers to the production method whereby goods were made one at a time, from their beginning to being finished.

This problem had first been addressed in the 18th century with the introduction of products with interchangeable parts. As is the case in many instances of history, military necessity was to play a major part in the further development of an idea. The United States War Department would begin to place growing orders for weapons to stock its armories. By the end of the 1820’s, the invention of milling machines and “part jigs” had made the interchangeability of rifle and pistol parts a reality. The idea soon transferred itself from weapons to other industries.

In the 19th century this idea would be augmented with the initiation of the “assembly line”. Now products could be produced using interchangeable parts along a line of production in which individual workers would only be responsible for applying a certain part to a finished product. This would in itself greatly increase production, as workers were not required to either produce a finished product, or to know how to.

However, this method would require increasing numbers of workers, and factories large enough to accommodate those workers along the assembly line. Extra space was necessary to produce, house, and store the parts needed for the assembly of a finished product. In many instances this required the building of additional factories and storage facilities, which required more workers and more space. The feasibility of this idea had been proven during the First Industrial Revolution in Europe, but it had mainly been limited to the textile industry, as found in England.

By that time, the introduction of machines to supplement production had become standard. The “Lowell System” then took the idea to the next step in the United States during the 19th century. Stealing the plans for textile machinery from English factories, Francis Lowell would begin to product cloth in the United States. After his death, Lowell’s partners took his ideas of production and created a textile factory whereby cotton-to-cloth production took place under one roof in one massive factory in 1826.

As the expenditures for facilities was next to labor as the single largest cost for companies, corporations looked to cut expenses by limiting their building costs. Because there were no building codes in place in the 19th century, there was nothing to regulate or require a corporation to consider the safety of its building, or that of its employees. This meant that many factories were dangerous places by nature. Because the “bottom line” for every corporation was profit, this meant speed of production was paramount, and this amplified the dangers to be found in factories. The safety of factories and the employees were of little concern in the face of growing profits.

The Workers

During the 19th century and into the next, the average American worker made his/her living in agriculture in one way, or another. Why then did larger and larger numbers of Americans begin to leave the security of the farm, for the uncertainty of the city? By the end of the century, this began to change as the “factory system” would offer increasing numbers and varieties of jobs. Agricultural work on farms required long hard hours of back breaking labor, from sun up to sun down. Many farmers worked long hours for little more than retaining the sustenance of their lives, their land, and their farms. Because of the need for labor, most farmers had large families,
and many of their children were disenchanted with the prospect of living out their lives on the family farm. By the end of the 19th century, the factory system had created a large and growing demand for labor. Many in rural America saw this as their chance to leave the farm and find a better life for themselves. They were drawn by the offer of a steady wage and the excitement of the city. The factories eagerly awaited their arrival. The Second Industrial Revolution had swept up the country.

At the same time, conditions in Europe led to waves of immigration. The promise of jobs and a better life had found their way across the Atlantic Ocean, and hundreds of thousands of immigrants made the trip to the United States. The “potato famines” in Ireland had seen the immigration of tens of thousands of Irish beginning in the mid 1800’s, and continuing toward the end of the century. By the next century, the “new immigration” saw the influx of hundreds of thousands of eastern and southern Europeans, as economic conditions in those European countries forced many to make the move to America.

As tens of thousands flooded into the cities, the corporations and their factories moved to employ them. Immigration created a “boom” for the corporations, as now there was a glut in the labor force. With tens of thousands looking to secure the same jobs, corporations were now able to address their greatest cost, labor. Wages quickly began to plunge as corporations played the supply and demand for labor against each other, with the added advantage of offering immigrants less money. With little or no resources in their new country, immigrants were willing to work longer hours for less pay than their American counterparts.

Employers were also quick to recognize the advantages of hiring children as well. In some industries such as textiles, the small hands of children had been immediately realized as an asset. Other industries soon moved to employ children as a cost saving measure, and for the fact that they could be more easily managed. Children were paid a considerably lower wage than adults, and presented much less of a problem when it came to disciplinary matters. Employers found children much easier to manipulate and threaten. For these reasons, employers looked to hire children whenever they had the opportunity, and when they felt that a child could do the same job as an adult.

At the same time, the growing influx of people into the cities created a logistical problem of housing. Corporations and speculators began to throw up tenement housing projects to address the growing need. Again, this was seen as an opportunity for profit. As was the case with the factories, there were no codes in place to regulate building, and as little expense as possible was used to accommodate the new workers and arrivals. This meant that the housing for workers was in most cases nearly as dangerous as their work places, while rents were placed as high as the market would stand.

The infrastructures of the cities were not equipped to meet the immediate expansion they faced and were soon overtaxed. Water and sewage needs were quickly overwhelmed and the ever expanding burrows of larger cities soon became places of squalor and disease. The despair of the farm was swiftly being replaced by that of the city and its factory life. While there are no census records for that period, it is estimated that combined, tens of thousands died from other than natural causes in the larger cities of the United States leading up to and entering into the 20th century. What is known is that while birth rates increased, infant mortality was found to be growing at a staggering rate. Labor activism would begin to address these issues that plagued the lives of workers.
The Rise of Unions

The first worker organizations in the United States were to be found in “craft associations” which acted more like the earlier “guild” societies found in Europe. The craft associations limited membership, regulated work standards and prices, set working conditions, and developed apprenticeships to produce craftsmen. In almost all cases, they were small limited organizations with little control beyond their own local markets. Still, they held sway over their various professions in the cities and areas where they operated. As they dealt mainly with skilled workers within a given trade, they had no influence on the growing labor climate in the corporate factories that began to develop after the American Civil War. If so, then what began to drive the need for different forms of labor organizations?

The advent of growing corporations and the factory system was going to demand a different form of organization to represent workers. As living conditions in the cities worsen, and as working conditions and wages declined, and work hours increased, workers began to move to address their needs with their employers. Their concerns fell on deaf ears as the corporations were only concerned with profits. Anything that threatened profits was to be ignored and was of no concern to the corporations, or their owners and investors. For this reason, workers began to organize in an effort to have their needs and concerns addressed. As employees moved to express their problems, concerns, and demands, employers simply looked to replace those that they found to be trouble makers.

This would give rise to the creation of “worker’s unions” on a much grander scale than that of the local craft associations. As the corporations had now gone “national”, so would the formation or worker organizations. Various labor federations attempted to form, as did “eight-hour leagues”, both of which looked to establish a mandatory limit of an eight-hour work day. It was not until the formation of the National Labor Union that any real attempt in national organizing would be found.

The National Labor Union

Founded in 1866, the National Labor Union (NLU) was the first large scale attempt to successfully organize workers on a national level. Led by William Sylvis, the NLU was able to form a coalition of local trade unions into a national body of workers. Drawing support from various smaller unions and skilled workers, the NLU also attracted unskilled workers, farmers, and agricultural laborers. At the same time, the union made little effort to recruit African-Americans and women to its membership, while it campaigned to prohibit Chinese immigration into the United States. All three groups made up significant numbers of workers in the country and could have swelled the ranks of the union, and would have given it considerably more clout. Still, at its height, the NLU would be able to count some 700,000 members in its numbers.

While the NLU realized early success in recruiting members, success in pressing for its demands was less triumphant. The union called for a mandatory eight-hour work day, improved wages for employees, and improved working conditions for its members. Of these objectives, the NLU only had real success with the eight-hour work day, and this relied on government. In 1868, Congress adopted an eight-hour work day for federal employees, and the union was also
successful in achieving comparable legislation for government employees in several states. However, due to loopholes in state laws, it found it difficult to have the legislations enforced. Furthermore, agencies in the Federal government quickly moved to reduce wages in relationship to the reduced hours. States that did reduce required hours, also followed suit in reducing wages for their employees.

The NLU emphasized arbitration as its chief tool in negotiating with business, while it distained the use of strikes. Beyond the government, this reduced the actions and negotiations of the NLU to little more than begging for change when it came to its dealings with American corporations. The union found strikes to be an ineffective tool, as it was difficult to organize large scale strikes, and virtually impossible to maintain them in the face of the employee’s limited financial assets. With the need to feed their families, employees simply could not afford to stay out on strike long enough for the “action” to have any significant effect on business.

By the end of the decade the NLU had already begun to see a reduction in its membership. When the union moved to make inroads into politics and support candidates in opposition to the two major parties, it met with one defeat after another. Support and membership plummeted leading into the next decade, and when a depression hit the country, it was the final blow for the NLU. By 1872, the union had been dissolved, and for the most part, its membership was swept up into a growing new national union – the Knights of Labor.

The Knights of Labor

With the demise of the National Labor Union, the first attempt to organize on a national level ended. Even as the NLU was dying, a new union movement was already underway. The Knights of Labor was founded in Philadelphia in 1869. This new union would grow to become the first truly national union and incorporate much of the union activity that had proceeded it, including the remnants of the NLU.

The Knights of Labor would begin to expand their membership to include both skilled and unskilled labor. By 1878, the union would move to include backs in its membership as well. That same year women were also being accepted into its ranks. This “total” inclusion would help the Knights to grow their membership toward nearly one million members at its height. The union looked to open their membership to “every laborer, mechanic, and artisan in the country that wanted to improve their condition”. It further stipulated that membership would be open to individuals regardless of their sex, nationality, color, or creed. This meant that membership was now open to most immigrants, and those of most religious persuasions.

The inclusion of women into the Knights of Labor led to an influx of female members, mostly from the textile industry, which had predominantly employed women as its labor source. The catalyst of this entry of women into the union has been accredited to Mary Jones. Known as “Mother Jones” to those that supported her, Jones was instrumental in recruiting women into the Knights of Labor. She became so adept at bringing women into the union, that she was band from entering most textile factories. Women known to have associated with her found it difficult to gain employment in factories where the Knights had not already established themselves.

Even as inclusion into the union increased, not everyone was embraced and welcomed. Bankers, lawyers, and corporate stockholders were excluded from the Knight’s membership. It was felt that these people were not “productive” members of society, but rather they preyed upon those that were. In the western states where Asian workers could be found in larger numbers, the
union and its assemblies excluded these people as well. Immigrant inclusion generally meant Europeans.

Referring to themselves as a “brotherhood of toil”, the Knights would also begin to expand the demands of employees beyond the eight hour work day and better wages. The union looked to end child labor (a serious problem at the time), called for equal pay for women, and employee participation in the ownership of factories. It would also move into the political arena by being one of the first organizations to call for a progressive income tax plan. This would later be carried into the agenda and platform of the Populist Party, more than a few of whose members belonged to the Knights of Labor at one time or another.

Uriah Stephens was one of the original founders of the Knights of Labor, and was seen by many as its early leader, as he had called for and presided over the first meeting in Philadelphia. Stephens had a history of involvement in labor activity including membership in a short lived garment craft union in Philadelphia. He would also become the first Grand Master Workman of the Knights. Stephens instilled the union with his belief that “the everlasting truth of the grand architect of the universe was one in that everything of value, or merit was the result of creative industry”. Stephens would hold the highest office in the union until 1879, when he had a falling out with the new direction the Knight’s General Assembly looked to take.

Early on, the Knights of Labor had a ritualistic aura surrounding them. The union’s creed revolved around a belief in the nobility of labor, the evils of wage slavery, a loathing for monopolies, and an aversion to excessive accumulation of individual wealth. Further, the Knights maintained a form of secrecy concerning their meetings, rituals, and even their name. This was due to Stephens and other early members association with various other secretive organizations such as the Masons and the Order of Fidelity.

Still, the Knights of Labor grew to include some twenty-three district assemblies, and over 1,300 local assemblies by 1879. And even though the union accepted black members and delegates in its district and local assemblies, it did not look to question the segregation of assemblies in the south. Regardless, southern blacks were drawn to the Knights for the same reasons whites were. All wanted to improve their condition in the workplace, fight for improved wages and work hours, and realize the “American Dream” of prosperity.

When divisions within the union moved to do away with the union’s elements of secrecy and change its ritual, Stephens stepped down from the leadership. The Knights of Labor then went fully public and membership began a new expansion. Having thrown off its cloak of fraternal secrecy, the Knights quickly began to act and function as a true union. The local assemblies, which were more in tune with the needs of their members, then moved to openly challenge corporate enterprises. Local assemblies first turned to the use of “strikes” as a method of forcing employers to address their labor demands.

With the resignation of Stephens, Terence Powderly assumed the leadership of the Knights of Labor. While he opposed the use of “strikes” as a tool of concession, the local assemblies held a great deal of autonomy due to the growing size and diversity of the union. By 1818, the Knights of Labor had made both its name and its purposes public, and had openly removed its initiation oaths. With this move, the union would enter into its greatest period of growth even though many local assemblies maintained parts of the union’s original rituals. With much of the element of secrecy removed, a new public acceptance occurred, and criticism of the union subsided. Thousands soon began to flock to join the Knights and its membership.

Under Powderly’s leadership, the Knights generally avoided strikes, as these met with varied and mostly limited success. The over-riding problem was one of sustaining a strike long
enough to see positive results. In most instances, employers could wait out employees, most of which could not go without their paychecks long enough to effect the profits of their employers. This in turn made strikes more detrimental to the workers than it was to the employers, or companies. Never-the-less, the Knights of Labor would be instrumental in supporting and aiding strikes across the country. In several cases these would find success due to the solidarity of employees and the sheer numbers of workers that “walked out”. In others, the results would be unsuccessful and lead to violence and failure.

In 1885, the Wabash Railroad Strike found support from the national leadership of the Knights of Labor. The union’s leadership, headed by Powderly, went against its normal policy and backed the strike. The strike was originally started when the railroad’s owner, Jay Gould attempted to drive members of the Knights of Labor out of his workforce. Not realizing the extent of the union’s membership in his workforce, Gould was eventually obliged to meet with Powderly and end his hostilities against the union. The union employees agreed to accept a small pay increase in return for ending their strike, while Gould accepted the union as the negotiating agent for the railroad workers.

This success moved to push the membership of the Knights of Labor over 700,000 and toward the million mark. Even with this victory, the days of the union were numbered. The progress and advance of the Knights of Labor and other unions was greatly predicated on public opinion. As long as they were seen in a positive light, they moved to reach their demands and achieve their goals. When its success and public opinion began to decline, the Knights of Labor quickly experienced a decline.

Local assemblies of the Knights of Labor would go against the advice of the leadership and support a strike against the Union Pacific Railroad in 1886. This was perhaps the greatest example of an unsuccessful strike supported by the Knights of Labor. As the strike spread to become the Great Southwest Railroad Strike, the Union Pacific moved to hire Pinkerton detectives to physically break the strike with the support of state militias. When engineers did not move to join the strike, the lack of solidarity was exploited by big business. The strike failed, and the violence that it had seen became a negative result for the Knights in the eyes of the public. Coupled with the violence in the Homestead Strike in 1892 (which the Knights also supported), the public turned on the union and membership plummeted.

Further, internal problems in the Knights of Labor would help lead to its decline by the end of the 1890’s. The union’s mismanagement, bureaucratic structure, and the support of unsuccessful strikes would help to weaken the movement. By 1890 its membership had fallen to around 100,000 members. When Powderly was replaced by new leadership, many members were drawn to other unions, new political parties such as the Populist Party, and the fast rising Socialist Labor Party, or the American Socialist Party. These last two would merge and create a new political energy in the coming century. By the end of the 19th century, the Knights of Labor’s membership had dipped under 20,000, and the union existed in little more that name only. The Knights of labor would linger on for several more decades before its final demise. The lack of success in the strikes it had supported and the violence that ensued were major factors in the union’s downfall.
Labor Violence: The Corporate Response

Some have said that the violent nature of labor relations was inevitable. If this is so, what brought this about? As labor unions formed and their numbers increased, the response of corporations and big business was calculated and exacting. Unions and their members were seen as a direct threat to the control and profits that corporate owners and investors were determined to protect. Labor labeled the owners and their banker cronies as “robber barons”. The term referred to the massive fortunes these men had amassed at the expense of smaller businesses, and on the backs of their workers. As socialist ideals of shared wealth increased in the ranks of labor, the capitalist principles of corporate owners and their investors became entrenched.

Big business quickly moved to safeguard its assets by hiring private police forces in the face of what it perceived to be a threat to industry, revenues, and the “American way”. Private security companies saw this as an opportunity to expand, and were ready to aid big business for a price. Before long, growing numbers of company policemen and spies could be found in factories and industries wherever unions were known to exist. An immediate animosity developed between the corporate police and union employees and workers.

This animosity erupted into violence in more than a few instances. One of the first areas of business to see labor agitation turn violent was the railroad industry. After the Civil War, railroads began to rapidly expand in the United States. Combined, the nation’s railroads soon became the second largest employers in the country next to agriculture. The industry also became one of the first to unionize, even before the founding of the NLU.

The Great Southwest Railroad Strike of 1886 would see some of the first violence between labor and big business. When an employee of the Union Pacific Railroad attended a meeting of the Knights of Labor on company time, he was fired. The union called a general strike and some 200,000 members walked out on strike in five states. Other than the firing, the strikers were motivated by low wages, long hours, and unsafe working conditions. Pinkerton detectives were hired to break up union meetings and attack union leaders to break the strike. The violence quickly escalated on both sides. Jay Gould, owner of the Union Pacific was heard to remark, “I can hire one half of the working class to kill the other half”. This would become the typical attitude that big business would hold toward organized labor. When state militias were sent in to restore order, this combined with Pinkerton attacks on strikers to force most of the strikers back to work, ending the strike. The failure of this strike would have a crippling effect on the Knights of Labor.

In 1877, the Great Railroad Strike of that year began in West Virginia, as workers went out on strike when they suffered a second reduction in wages in the same year. When the strikers began to destroy railroad property, the state militia was sent in to restore order. The strike spread into surrounding states, including Maryland where state militia units fired on and killed striking workers who had attacked them with clubs. In Pennsylvania, some twenty strikers were killed in a shootout with state militia. After state governors appealed to Washington for help, President Hayes ordered federal troops into the states to stop the violence. Rail lines were shut down for nearly forty-five days before state militia and federal troops finally crushed the strike. Once again a strike had ended in violence, destruction, and failure.

The first labor action to gain international attention occurred in 1886 with the “Haymarket Riot, or Affair” as it became known. In May of that year, a rally was organized in Chicago by anarchists in support of a local strike for the eight hour work day and in protest of police shootings of strikers along a picket line the day before. Held in the public setting of Haymarket
Square, police were called in to preserve the peace. The rally was at first peaceful, but when police moved to disperse the gathering, a bomb was tossed into the line of advancing officers. The explosion killed at least one police officer, and gunfire between the two groups resulted in the combines deaths and injury of some twenty or more policemen and civilians.

The consequent trials saw the conviction of eight anarchists and/or union activists. Four of these men were sentenced to death and executed, while another committed suicide awaiting execution. The event had the affect of polarizing the city and its working and immigrant population, as several of those convicted were of European origin. The result was a public and international outcry against the verdict. At the same time, a ground swell of immigrant resentment was started by the local and national press in the country, which characterized the riot and the defendants as the acts of assassins, ruffians, cutthroats, and radical immigrants. To this day, the trial and executions are seen as one of the most grievous “miscarriages of justice” in United States history. Only the Sacco and Vanzetti trials and convictions, and the later trial and acquittal of O.J. Simpson are considered to be on par by many historians. In each case the evidence was either significantly inconclusive and/or non-existent, or it was overwhelmingly decisive, and nearly irrefutable. In both instances, racial perceptions dictated the outcomes of the cases more than the evidence that was presented.

In 1892, the Homestead Strike outside of Pittsburg became another example of the growing violence between labor and big business. The Carnegie Steel Company, which had its iron works in Homestead, would go head to head against the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers (A.A.) union. The owner of the steel works at Homestead, Andrew Carnegie, had employed Henry Flick as head of operations. While Carnegie was publicly in favor of labor unions, he agreed with Frick that the A.A. had to be broken. The union practically ran the town, had great support from the citizenry, and held collective bargaining powers for the steel workers.

When the annual contract was due to expire, the company and the union moved into negotiations. Frick planned to use the new contract to break the power of the union by calling for a 20% reduction in wages and a reduction of the work force. When the union asked for a wage increase, Frick moved to lock workers out of several mills, and stated that if an agreement could not be reached by the end of the present contract, the company would no longer recognize the union as the voice of the workers.

Frick then moved to erect wire fencing around the steel mills. Guard towers were also constructed with pressure cannons at the entrances. The Carnegie mills at Homestead became armed camps in the face of the impending strike. The union rejected the last offer by the company, and a general strike was called. The Knights of Labor agreed to support the strike, and together the two unions determined to keep the plant closed to strike breakers.

When the company then tried to introduce the first strike breakers, the replacement workers were driven off by A.A. strikers with the threat of bodily harm. Under a request from Frick, the county sheriff sent deputies into Homestead to order the strikers to stop their obstruction of plant operations. The deputies were peacefully escorted from the town by the strikers and told not to return. Frick responded by hiring the Pinkerton Detective Agency.

In July of 1892, three hundred Pinkerton men were armed with rifles, load onto barges, and towed up the river to Homestead. Hundreds of strikers and townspeople turned out to confront the Pinkerton men. The battle that resulted lasted all day and saw the deaths of nearly two dozen people combined. Other workers arrived from Pittsburg and the surrounding towns, swelling the striker’s numbers into the thousands. The Pinkerton men were forced to surrender, and were beaten as they were escorted to a train and carried out of Homestead.
Initially, the governor of Pennsylvania was reluctant to act. As the strikers controlled the city and were supported by the citizens of the town, he feared that a massacre might take place if state militia units were sent in to soon. A week after the initial confrontation, the Pennsylvania Militia arrived and secured the Carnegie mills. With several thousand militia men on hand, the company was able to bring in replacement workers and reopen its plants. However, the strike continued even after the town was placed under martial law.

When Frick turned to take legal action against the strike leaders, an attempt was made on his life. He was shot and stabbed twice in his office by an anarchist, but he survived. The attack had the effect of ending the strike. With the plants now operating, and the union nearly bankrupt from paying the strikers, many began to cross the remaining picket lines. The strike had been broken, strike leaders were jailed, and the state militia withdrew from the town in October.

The A.A. was shattered as a labor union as a result of the strike, and the Knights of Labor had been involved in another bloody and unsuccessful labor strike. For its part, big business had developed a new method of breaking unions and strikes with the use of private police forces and violence. By instigating violence with strikers, they could then count of the intervention of state and federal agencies to restore order in their favor. The term “labor violence” entered the American vocabulary, with no mention of business, which was generally the instigator.

The American Federation of Labor

Even as the Knights of Labor declined, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) was being established. In 1886, Samuel Gompers worked to reorganize the defunct Federation of Trades and Labor (FTL). Starting in Ohio, Gompers rallied the FTL’s former members to establish the American Federation of Labor. This union would become the largest combination and merger of labor in the United States in the first half of the 20th century.

The AFL would focus its efforts toward concerns for working conditions, wages, and control of jobs and positions. It looked to limit political concerns, except were these dealt with labor legislation. Unlike the socialist ideals of other political and union organizations that would arise at this time, the AFL viewed capitalism as a pathway to increase for its members. If the company prospered, then its members could negotiate a greater share of that prosperity. In this way, the AFL would not challenge the rights of ownership under capitalism, but would work at securing the direct demands of its members.

The union would also build its bureaucracy and organizational model on that of business. This became the idea of “business unionism”, whereby the union would copy the corporate structure in its manner of organization and operation. With this, the AFL looked to “sell itself” to big business, rather than to force acceptance. The Federation also championed itself as an alternative to the working class radicalism that was used to characterize other union movements and activity. Rather than involve itself with new and/or radical political movements, the AFL would support or oppose members of the two major political parties in the country. Its chief aim was always to focus on political safeguards for unionization.

The Federation originally excluded blacks from its membership. It also supported legislation to limit western and southern European immigration into the United States on the grounds that these people were mostly illiterate and a threat to American jobs as well. When the Federation moved to merge with unions that did have black labor, the union sanctioned segregated locals (halls). The AFL also supported the exclusion of Asians, and organized
boycotts against industrial companies that used Asian workers, particularly in the west, where racism toward Asians was strong. The Federation’s policy was also comparably the same toward women. For all intensive purposes, in its early years, the AFL was a union of white men.

The AFL would thus begin to build its membership mostly around white “skilled workers”. As these men generally were the top wage earners in the labor force, the union would identify itself and its interests closely with white America, and their ideal of the American Dream. Racial issues aside, as AFL president, Gompers rarely allowed the union to stray far from the basic principles, concerns, and interest that it was founded upon. Holding to these basic tenets, Gompers would be elected as president every year but one, until his death.

The union would work to establish itself by incorporating all types of trade unions and skilled laborers in various industries. Bringing these together in a grand union would allow the AFL to withstand the schemes that had been used by big business and corporations to break earlier union activity. The union would employ the combined strategies of negotiations, boycotts, and where needed, strikes to gain the best agreements for its members, but always working within the present system.

To insure the effectiveness of its strikes, the Federation required its members to pay dues to the union. This covered the costs of union activities and more importantly acted as “strike insurance” whereby workers were paid from the Federation’s funds when they went on strike. This allowed the AFL to extend strikes long enough to economically impact companies and force concessions.

By the first decade of the 20th century, the AFL included a membership approaching two million. And while it represented the more elite of the working class, the Federation was able to increase its impact as a growing power for American labor. The union’s ability to organize union representation and memberships in industry went unchecked until the next decade. Still, big business was not prepared to throw in the towel.

Big business soon began a determined effort to force legislation for “open shops” to break the AFL’s union strongholds in industry. Corporations also began to utilize “labor injunctions” to force unions to suspend their activities. These efforts were successful to some degree, and in the years leading up to World War One, the membership of the AFL declined. States such as Florida passed laws limiting the effectiveness of unions, in an effort to attract industry. With the advent of America’s entry into the war, unions were given significant new protections in order to maintain an uninterrupted production of war materials. By 1920, AFL membership was moving toward four million, before it began to lose ground in the face of the Great Depression and renewed efforts by business to stop union activity.

With the death of Gompers, William Green became AFL president in 1924, just as the union began to deal with internal dissension. The war and the following economic boom in the United States created larger industries and corporations which relied more on semi-skilled and unskilled labor. The AFL found it hard to organize these workforces and their unions, as they fell outside of its traditional membership of skilled labor. Semi-skilled and unskilled workers were paid much less than skilled labor, and were reluctant to pay the dues demanded by the AFL. Never-the-less, the Federation made inroads into the new auto, rubber, and manufacturing industries.

The new unions that joined the AFL soon began to dissent and moved to form a separate organization within the Federation, much like corporations had formed subsidiary companies. In 1935, John Lewis led the formation of the Committee for Industrial Organization. As their numbers and voice within the AFL grew, the Federation moved to oust the Committee that then
referred to itself as the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). In 1937, the AFL split with the CIO and the two unions went their separate ways. Both would continue to benefit from federal legislation such as the National Labor Relations Act (Wagner Act) which prohibited business from interfering in union affairs, or their legal activities. Union memberships grew under the new protections afforded them.

The division between the AFL and the CIO would remain into World War Two and afterwards. Then in 1955, the two unions reunited in the face of changing economic times, and the need to build a stronger labor voice. The new AFL-CIO would now become the nation’s foremost labor organization. However, even as the unity increased its presence, the AFL-CIO’s influence in business began to diminish. While the union remains resilient to this day, its effectiveness in the work place does not compare to the power it once held at its apex.

Industrial Workers of the World

The formation of one of the last national unions has been described as being a political movement more than a labor association. What made the Industrial Workers of the World different, and why were they seen in a totally different light? The next move toward unionism based its idealism on a totally different understanding of the purpose of unionization. The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) was founded in Chicago in 1905. Calling for a meeting of workers opposed to the politics of the AFL, some two hundred like-minded socialists, anarchists, and radical unionists met in the city, and held the new union’s first convention. The first congress of the Industrial Union Convention then moved to officially inaugurate the labor movement. Founding members included William Haywood, Daniel De Leon, Eugene Debs, and Mary Jones (Mother Jones), among others.

Uniting under the slogan, “injury to one of us is an injury to all”, a new take on the previous motto of the Knights of Labor, the IWW would set its primary goals as being worker solidarity, and the revolutionary struggle to overthrow the employing class. The new union formed around the belief that the AFL and other unions had failed to adequately represent the needs of the common American working class. The IWW set its lofty aspirations at moving to address the concerns of the disenfranchised working class, and those of the world’s vast labor force. Their overriding philosophy was to lead the working class in abolishing the wage system and capitalism, both of which they saw as methods of enforcing working class servitude.

Known as the Wobblies, the IWW established its organization bureaucracy around the principles of workplace democracy and self-management. It is thought to be an early example of socialist democracy, and the movement’s formation is considered to be an important event in the history of industrial unionism, and also that of the American labor movement. The Wobblies looked to organize all workers as a class within the larger society. They understood society to consist of the working class, and the employing class, and felt that the two had little or nothing in common. They would take the Marxist ideal of “class struggle” as their banner and emphasized industrial unionism, in opposition to the trade and craft unionism of the AFL.

From the beginning the IWW opposed negotiation of contracts, which they felt limited the power of workers to strike. They also opposed the wage system, which they saw as a means that employers used to enslave workers. Instead they advocated “profit sharing” as a more equitable means of worker payment. The Wobblies believed that the more the company made, the more
the workers should make under an equity of divided profits. From the beginning, this would put them at odds with big business which held the American capitalist system as being nearly sacred.

The IWW would strive to make the “general strike” its weapon in overthrowing the old system of wage earnings and corporate profits. They looked to replace this with an economic practice that stressed and rewarded the worker and deemphasized competition. Instead of competition, they determined to make cooperation the foundation of business. Unlike the Knights of Labor, who moved gradually toward inclusion, from the beginning, the Wobblies would incorporate the idea as a fundamental tenet of their principles. A policy of total inclusion was seen as not only essential to the union’s growth, it was held as a moral and ethical standard in a time when racism and nativism were prominent in the United States. Some members hoped to see the day when the union would become so inclusive that it would replace government as the basis of society.

Almost from its formation, the IWW was denounced by both politicians and the press as a threat to the free market system, capitalism, and the American way. It was further labeled as an attempt to create a monopoly in the labor market, even as monopolies in industry were being frowned upon and fought against in courts. The Wobblies had touched a sensitive cord in big business, and corporations quickly moved to suppress what they saw as a dangerous movement in opposition to their control of industry.

Anti-communist sympathies had not reached the United States, as the Russian Revolution had not yet occurred, but already the IWW was being branded as an extreme leftist organization. With De Leon and Debs in its leadership, one faction of the IWW clearly held socialist ideals as its principle directives and motivations. Both felt that political antagonism was way the union could attain its goals. Another faction headed by Haywood and William Trautmann looked to use strikes and boycotts as a direct path to change. They believed that in this way the union could more quickly realize its objectives. When the Haywood faction succeeded in winning over the general assembly, the union split, and hard line socialists left the union to form the Workers’ International Union.

The IWW would see its first success in labor activism during the Steel Car Strike of 1909. The Pressed Steel Car Company, located in Pennsylvania employed mostly unskilled immigrant labor, many of which associated themselves with the IWW. Conditions in the plant were horrid and wages were barely at subsistence levels. The plant itself was referred to by locals as the “Slaughterhouse”, as the factory averaged one death per shift, and more when production quotas ran behind.

The strike began on a Saturday payday after workers wages were not paid in full. Worker representatives demanded to address management and the company refused. The company then employed a strike-breaking agency to escorted replacement workers into the plant. When they were fired upon by the strikers, the company called for and received police support.

The following day some five-hundred constables and deputy sheriffs arrived and proceeded to evict strikers from company housing. Weeks later, strikers and IWW members clashed with state police. When IWW leader William Trautmann was arrested for instigation after this “Bloody Sunday, others in the IWW leadership arrived to rally the strikers to their cause. Haywood and Debs both gave speeches to steel the resolve of the strikers. The strike was ended in September when the company agreed to increase wages, end company housing abuses, and stop the harassment of workers families.

The IWW had gained earlier notoriety when it led several demonstrations for “free speech”. When the town of Spokane, Washington prohibited street assemblies, IWW activists
protested the ordinance. The union was able to unite popular sentiment against this infringement of a basic American right. When IWW leaders in the town were arrested for assembling, other members quickly rallied large numbers of people to gather in the city center. After some five-hundred people were arrested, and several were killed, the authorities were forced to yield and rescind the ordinance. The union would defy authorities and hold rallies for free speech and the right to openly organize in several cities including San Diego and Fresno. IWW speakers drew growing support by reviving the ghosts of British tyranny against colonial assemblies.

By the end of the first decade of the 20th century, IWW membership had topped 50,000. IWW support was greatest in the migrant farm work segment of the economy. Being the most disenfranchised workers in the country, tens of thousands flocked to the union as their only voice in a society that saw them as expendable. Even as the Wobblies made inroads into various sectors of the working class, their insistence to abstain from collective bargaining agreements cost them much of their gains. Many workers saw the ability to secure standard pay as a vast improvement over their previous condition.

Across the country, the IWW was involved in and supported some 150 different strikes in the first half of the last century. While not always successful, the IWW presence was a factor in more than a few of labor’s victories. This did not go unnoticed by big business or by government officials, both of which viewed the union as a threat.

When the IWW opposed entry into World War One, they were branded as unpatriotic and anti-American. The Wobblies alluded to the war as little more than one group of capitalists fighting another group over control of wealth, neither of which being willing to share that wealth with the working class. They decried the conflict as a struggle whereby the rich got richer, and working class were forced to die at the hands of each other.

The federal government would use World War One as a means to crush the IWW. After passage of the Espionage Act, federal officials raided IWW meeting halls and arrested over 150 of the union’s leaders. They were then charge with un-American activities and conspiracy to hinder the war effort. Over one-hundred were found guilty and sentenced to prison sentences.

After the war, the Nye Commission would report the truth, when it uncovered that munitions producers and bankers made fortunes during the war, and had been culpable in bring American entry into the war to recoup the large sums of debt that the Allies owed to American banks and firms. IWW warnings fell on deaf ears at the time, and afterwards, the economic boom of the 1920's washed away much of the resentment toward American corporations and big business.

With the successive waves of anti-communist sentiment that swept across the country after the Russian Revolution, and again during the Cold War, IWW membership plummeted to under 10,000. With many of its leaders labeled as either communists or communist sympathizers, the union would find it hard to recruit members. Its lofty goals to cooperation and equal wealth were never to be realized. While the IWW is still in existence today, and still organizing labor activity, it is little more than a relic of a time when some men dreamed of a world where economic and social equality would be a reality for everyone.

Conclusions

The growth of unions and worker activism in the United States can be seen as one of need. As corporations and big business expanded their work forces, and the needs of workers went
unmet, unions stepped into the void to raise their concerns. The ensuing clash over control of the workplace led to confrontation and in many instances violence.

Government’s lack of response, and it early moves to back business led to the growing frustrations of workers. Why was this so? Big businesses ability to rely on authorities to back their interests, further exasperated a growing problem. When labor did win concessions, it was only after much hardship, and in most instances required the shedding of blood. Still, labor was persistent over the long run and it was to pay off.

The Progressive Era as a dramatic change in the attitude of government toward the common laborer. While conditions did not change as quickly for workers, the country was beginning to move down a new path. Unions began to form and gain growing protection under the law. The New Deal during the Great Depression brought a new sense of responsibility to both government and business. And while unions still had to struggle to gain their demands, the tide had turned. Union membership swelled, and life for workers improved between the two World Wars.

The decades after World War Two would see the nation’s workforce move away from unionism, as big business and corporations addressed several of the major issues that American workers found to be most important. The federal government would begin to address the concerns of worker after the turn of the last century, and pass a myriad of legislations to give workers greater protections and rights as well.

Today, unions are neither as numerous nor as influential as they have been in the past, and their memberships have dwindled considerably. This can be attributed and credited to a great degree on the success that unions have had in the American workplace. Most of the rights and privileges that American workers enjoy today are the result of the struggles that the nation’s unions have fought for their members. While the majority of national unions have died off over time, their legacy can be seen across the country in every paycheck, every pension, and every eight hour work day.

**Questions**

1. Was “labor violence” inevitable and unavoidable? What factors played into causing much of the confrontation between unions and big business.

2. What were some of the different and mutual demands of the various national unions? What tactics did they employ to realize their demands?

3. When viewed from the perspective of the corporations, what do you think they were so adamant in opposing unions?
Further Reading