

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?



Workers Try Domination to Solve Their Problems

Many low-income workers in the late 1800s felt that tolerating low wages and unsafe working conditions was not an acceptable solution to their problems. Some of these workers tried moving as a solution. The average industrial worker changed jobs about every three years; and in some industries, nearly all the workers quit before they had been working a year. However, moving to another low-skilled job often did not result in better wages or safer working conditions.

The solution of accommodating might have worked if the business owners were also willing to accommodate. However, big business owners had no reason to accommodate. There were plenty of workers, so business owners could simply fire the workers who wanted changes and hire new workers in their place.

Tolerating, accommodating, and moving were often not possible or acceptable to many workers. These workers began to join together to gain enough power to force business owners to improve pay and working conditions. These workers attempted to use domination to solve their problems.

“More! More! More!” Speech
What does labor want? We want more schoolhouses and less jails; more books and less arsenals; more learning and less vice; more leisure and less greed; more justice and less revenge; in fact, more of the opportunities to cultivate our better natures, to make manhood more noble, womanhood more beautiful, and childhood more happy and bright.

As one voice labor must speak—to reward its friends and punish its enemies.

Quoted in *Labor*
(Railroad Brotherhoods’ weekly),
August 4, 1956
Samuel Gompers

20. Why were business owners unwilling to accommodate to solve the workers’ problems?

21. Why was moving often not a solution to the workers’ problems?

Unions. A **union** is a group of workers who join together to try to get better wages and better working conditions. A single worker who complained to an employer would have little power. However, a group of workers would have a better chance of getting the employer to listen to the workers’ requests. The workers in a union elect a leader who talks with the manager of the company for whom the union members work. The manager and the union leader try to reach an agreement about wages and working conditions.

22. What is the advantage for workers of forming a union?

Strikes. A **strike** occurs when workers stop working in order to force their employers to give them better wages or better working conditions. During a strike, the company cannot make much money. People who normally buy the company’s product or service often have to buy that product or service from some other company. During a strike, the company will often look at how much profit they will lose during the strike. Then the company calculates how much money it will cost to meet the strikers’ demands. If the cost of meeting the strikers’ demands is less than the profit the company will lose, then the company might give in to the demands of the strikers. If the cost of meeting the strikers’ demands is too high, then the company will hold out and not give what the strikers want.

23. When is it likely that a company will give in to the demands of a union on strike?

Discussion Do you think that all workers should have the right to strike?



Cartoon attacking the Knights of Labor

Local Union Organization

Before the Civil War, the few unions that existed consisted of skilled workers and often were not permanent organizations. Workers in a factory would form a union to deal with a particular problem. The first workers’ strikes in the United States occurred in 1786 because workers were angry over the use of new machinery that was dangerous or that eliminated some jobs.

Industrialization grew slowly before the Civil War and so did unions. Most unions represented the workers who had a specific skill in just one factory in a

single 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 fired and blacklisted. When a person was blacklisted, employers gave their name 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.

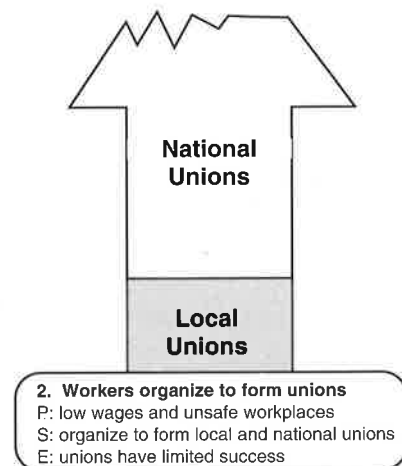
27. What three things did workers realize about their attempts to gain power?

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

29. What are two ways the unions tried to gain power for the workers?

Unions Working for Legislation

National Labor Union. The first attempt after the Civil War to organize a national coalition that represented workers from many different occupations was the National Labor Union (NLU). It was formed in 1866 and lasted until 1872. The National Labor Union supported politicians who favored laws that would help workers. However, the National Labor Union wasn't able to get any laws passed and wasn't able to help the workers get higher wages or better working conditions. When the depression began in 1873, many people lost their jobs and remaining interest in the National Labor Union disappeared.

30. Why did the NLU only last several years?

Knights of Labor. Another national union, the Knights of Labor, was formed in 1869. By 1885, it had almost 700,000 members out of the 20 million people then in the labor force. The Knights of Labor recruited women, African Americans, Mexicans, and immigrants, as well as white male workers. It recruited unskilled as well as skilled workers. There was serious disagreement with the union on whether strikes should be used. The union leader, Terrance Powderly, believed that strikes would make the public turn against unions. He and other union officials wanted to set up cooperatives and get legislation passed. Many workers disagreed and wanted to use strikes to get higher wages.

In 1886, two events occurred that hurt the Knights of Labor. First, a strike by other workers against the railroads in the Southwest resulted in violence. When Powderly criticized the strikers, many Knights of Labor members became angry and quit the union.

In 1886, an event occurred which eventually led to the ruin of the Knights of Labor. In that year, over 1,400 workers were on strike in Chicago against the huge McCormick Harvester Company, which made farm machinery. During the strike, a policeman shot and killed a striker. The next day, the Knights of Labor sponsored a large rally at Haymarket Square in support of the striking workers. When police tried to stop the rally, someone set off a bomb that killed seven policemen. No one could identify the bomber, but police arrested eight anarchists and union organizers. An **anarchist** is someone who thinks that all governments are corrupt and cannot represent the people. The newspapers blamed the killings on the Knights of Labor, and many people turned against the union. After 1886, its influence decreased; and by 1890, its membership had fallen to 100,000.

31. Why did some members quit the Knights of Labor?

32. What event ruined the Knights of Labor?

33. What is an anarchist?

Unions Using Strikes

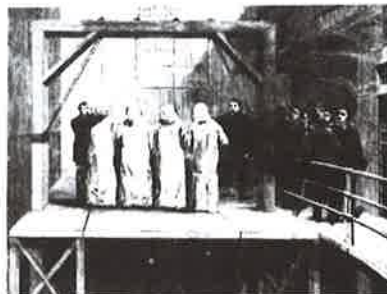
The Molly Maguires. While some unions worked on legislation, most other unions used strikes to gain their demands. The unions that favored strikes were usually the unions that organized workers in just certain industries. In the 1870s, coal miners in Schuylkill, Pennsylvania, began organizing a union called the Workingmen's Benevolent Association. Part of these union workers formed a secret organization called the **Molly Maguires**, named after an Irish rebel group in the 1800s. As the Workingmen's Benevolent Association organized, the owners of the coal mine brought in more recent immigrants to replace the union workers. This policy led to resentment between the union workers and



Terrance Powderly



Haymarket Square



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



came to protect factory property. **Pinkertons** were private police hired by companies to protect the buildings and equipment. The governor of Pennsylvania sent in the national guard to force the strikers out of the steel plant. **National guard** is another name for state militia.

The workers continued the strike for five months. The workers in Carnegie's other steel mills were not part of the Iron and Steel Workers Union, and they did not go on strike. This allowed the Carnegie Steel Company to continue producing steel and making a profit. Finally, the workers at the Homestead Plant gave up and went back to work at the lower wages.

38. Why did workers at the Homestead Steel Plant go on strike?

39. Why was their strike not successful?

40. What are Pinkertons?

41. What is the national guard?



Pullman Strike

Pullman strike. In 1894, another major railroad strike occurred, this time against the Pullman Car Company in Chicago. George Pullman's company made the railroad sleeping cars and dining cars used throughout the country. The Pullman Company was being hurt by the depression that started in 1893 because railroad companies stopped ordering new dining and sleeping cars. The strike started when the Pullman Car Company tried to maintain profits by cutting back the wages of its workers. At the same time, Pullman refused to reduce rent for the housing in which many of his workers lived.

When the Pullman Company refused to negotiate with its workers, the American Railway Union, led by Eugene V. Debs, joined in support of the workers. The union supported the workers by refusing to hook up any Pullman cars to trains. Railroad owners asked for help from the government. The courts said that the union had to stop the strike, and federal troops were sent to Chicago. A battle between troops and strikers broke out. Several strikers were killed, and Debs was arrested and jailed. Within a month, the strike was stopped and the workers had gained nothing.

42. Why did workers strike against the Pullman Car Company?

43. What was the effect of their strike?

Industrial Workers of the World. A very different kind of national union started in 1905. Unlike the American Federation of Labor, which was limited to skilled workers, the Industrial Workers of the World (the IWW) tried to organize unskilled workers such as lumberjacks, miners, construction workers, field hands, dock workers, and cannery workers. Many of these workers were scattered across the West and had jobs that required moving from place to place. The IWW used strikes and work slowdowns to try to improve worker wages and conditions. Although the union had less than 200,000 workers, they were well known for their giant rallies, picket lines, and songs about workers. The union won few strikes because it was so difficult to organize its members.

44. How was the IWW different from the AFL?

45. Why was it hard for the IWW to organize its members?



Mine workers

Discussion What unions are there in your state? What workers do they represent?

Why Unions Had Limited Success

Between 1881 and 1905, over 37,000 strikes occurred in the United States

as 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. In 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 tried 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

courts would issue an order for the union to stop striking. If the union did not stop striking, police and National Guard soldiers could be called in.

52. What is the third reason that unions did not have much success?

53. How did the Supreme Court hurt unions?

Test

Question 2: Explain how workers in the late 1800s tried to solve their problems with wages and unsafe working conditions. Begin with a general statement about the problem, the solution, and the effect.

Basic Answer: In the late 1800s, workers organized unions to solve their problems. Their problems were low wages and unsafe working conditions. The solution was for the workers to cooperate and form unions. First, workers formed local unions and later formed national unions. These unions used strikes to try to force employers to increase wages or make working conditions safer. Some unions worked on getting new laws passed. Unions had little success in solving the problems of the workers.

Exemplary Answer: In the late 1800s, workers organized unions to solve their problems. Their problems were low wages and unsafe working conditions. First, workers formed local unions in single factories. These unions used strikes to try to force employers to increase wages or make working conditions safer. These unions did not have enough power to dominate business owners, so workers formed national unions. Some unions, like the Knights of Labor, tried accommodation and worked on getting new laws passed. Most other unions continued using strikes. Unions were not successful because they did not have enough members, legislators would not pass effective laws, and the courts supported the business owners.



Practice

Describe three ways in which industrialization changed America in the late 1800s.

End of Section Questions: **Workers' Problems and Solutions**

Part A: **Core Test Questions**

1. Describe three ways in which industrialization changed America in the late 1800s.
2. Explain how workers in the late 1800s tried to solve their problems with wages and unsafe working conditions.

Part B: **Supplemental Questions**

3. **Vocabulary.** Write the word or words for each lettered definition:
 - a. a group of workers who join together to try to get better wages.
 - b. a promise by a worker not to join a union.
 - c. people who work for a business when the regular workers are on strike.
 - d. a secret organization named after an Irish rebel group.
 - e. another name for state militia.
 - f. someone who thinks all governments are corrupt.
 - g. workers stop working in order to force employers to

- meet their demands.
- h. private police hired by companies.

4. What determines a person's standard of living?
5. How did low wages affect workers' standard of living?
6. Describe the working-condition problems many workers had.
7. What happens to a person who is blacklisted?
8. By 1869, what three things did unions realize about their attempts to gain power?
9. What are the two ways that unions tried to organize on a national level?
10. What are two ways the unions tried to gain power for the workers?
11. What event ruined the Knights of Labor?