

The Rise of Labor Unions

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Description

As America's factories grow in the late 19th century, so do the demands for unions as workers struggle with long hours, low wages and dangerous working conditions.

Keywords

Industrial America, Labor, Federation Of Organized Labor, Homestead Strike, Haymarket Riot, Andrew Carnegie, Samuel Gompers, George Meany, AFL-CIO, Technological Development, Late Nineteenth Century, Labor And Unions, Federation Of Organized Trade And Labor Union, Urban Society, Railroad, Steel Industry, Organized Labor, Union Violence, Working Conditions, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Chicago, Illinois

Transcript

The Rise of Labor Unions

NARRATOR: As America's industrial economy grew in the late 19th century, factories replaced farms, and workers struggled with long hours, low wages, and dangerous working conditions. At mills, mines, and railroads across the country, workers soon began to organize unions.

Professor CHRIS CAPOZOLLA (MIT): 1870 is an important turning point. The Census reveals for the

first time that the majority of American men work for a living, work for someone else. So this old America of small businesses and farms is just starting to disappear. By the 1880s, things were moving very quickly, and industrialization was underway. There were all kinds of new labor movements popping up.

NARRATOR: One of the first attempts to create a national labor organization started in 1869 with an umbrella group called the Noble Order of the Knights of Labor. Unlike most other organizations that excluded women and certain types of workers, the Knights of Labor was open to almost everyone.

Professor EDWARD T. O'DONNELL (Holy Cross College): It's essentially a union of unions. And eventually has hundreds of member unions, eventually a membership of almost 700,000 by 1886, 1887, and becomes a very influential force in trying to compel employers and politicians who have the power to regulate business to get them to adopt more humane working conditions, better wages, shorter hours.

CAPOZOLLA: The Knights of Labor is designed to protect workers' independence, and it's designed to be open to everyone. There are only four kinds of people who are excluded from membership in the Knights of Labor: Bankers, lawyers, liquor dealers and professional gamblers.

NARRATOR: Though the Knights initially had lofty goals to reform the American economy, its power began to fade in 1886 after a railroad company squashed the workers' effort to strike. As the Knights' role in the labor movement was shrinking, another organization, called the American Federation of Labor, or AFL, was gaining strength. It was led by cigar-maker Samuel Gompers.

O'DONNELL: Gompers was a key figure. And he kind of stepped away from some of the visionary goals of the Knights of Labor, who really wanted to transform society in a lot of ways. And he said, "Really, it's about bread and butter issues. It's about short hours, higher wages, better conditions, and that's it." And the AFL was very successful in a lot of ways.

NARRATOR: Successful and long-standing. After merging with the Congress of Industrial Organizations in 1955, the AFL became the AFL-CIO and continues to be a key force in the American labor movement today.

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