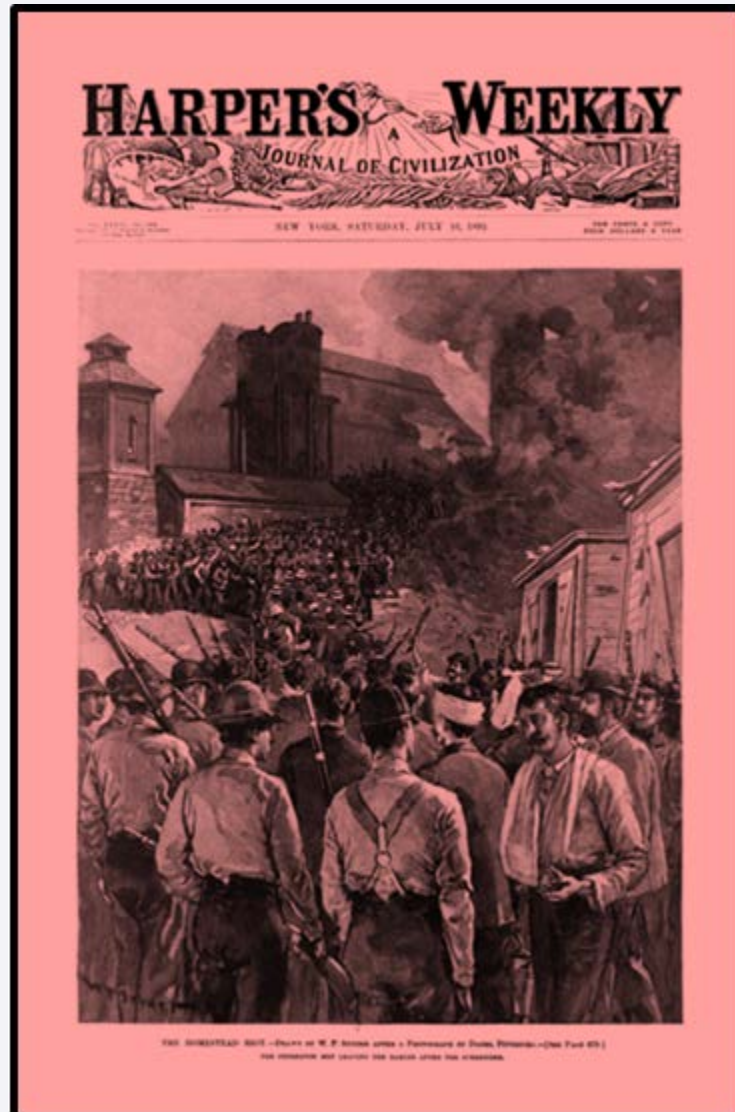


LABOR FINDS ITS VOICE



Cover of Harper's magazine picturing the Homestead Strike

Unit Overview

The rapid growth of industry in the United States during the late nineteenth century resulted in an equally rapid rise in the number of industrial workers. Little government regulation and a desire for greater profits caused most corporate executives to ignore the

concerns of their workforce. Employees recognized the importance of unity and joined organizations like the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor to demand an eight-hour day, safer working conditions and wages. Let's see how it all happened.

Labor's Growing Discontent

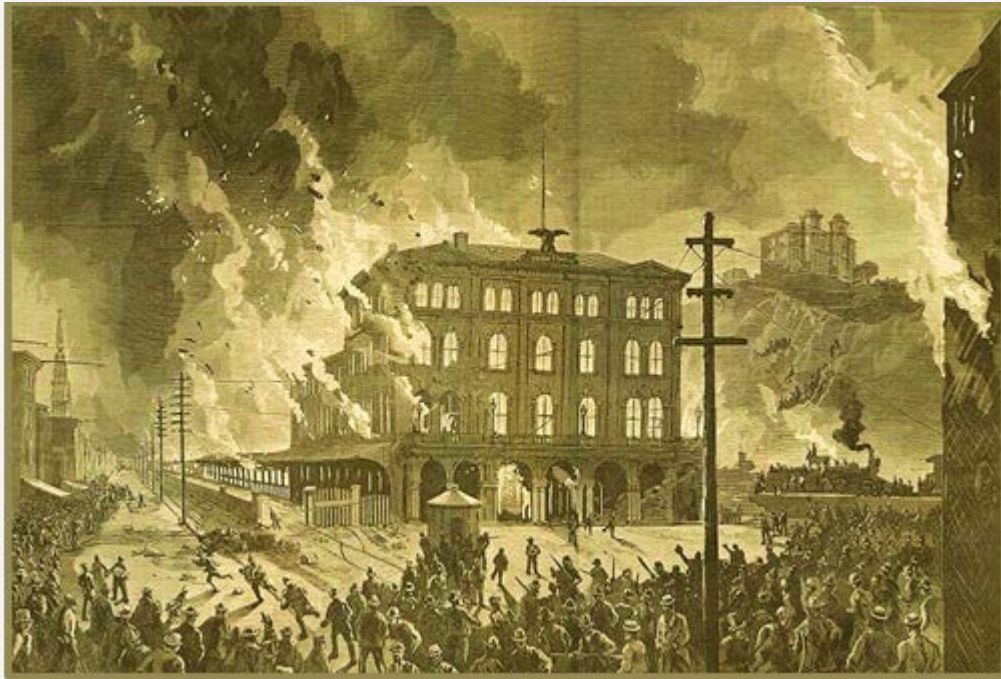
Author Mark Twain referred to the last three decades of the nineteenth century as the **Gilded Age**. He meant that industrialism had achieved glittering results on the surface but was supported by corruption and poverty. While corporate executives amassed great wealth, workers struggled with low wages, long hours and hazardous conditions. Women, African Americans, children and immigrants often earned less than \$1 a day. Mass production and the assembly line forced employees to perform the same tasks over and over; decision making and creative thinking remained in the hands of management. Tension between companies and employees surfaced and sometimes escalated to violence. The **Great Railroad Strike of 1877** is one example.

The Great Railroad Strike: Timeline of Events	
1865	Banks begin to overextend themselves to finance the railroad boom.
1873	A financial panic resulted in an economic depression.
March, 1877	The Supreme Court upheld the Granger Laws which regulated rail rates. This decreased profits for the railroads.
May, 1877	The Pennsylvania Railroad cut wages by 10%. Other railroads followed this example.
July, 1877	The Pennsylvania Railroad doubled the length of certain trains without increasing the crews.
July, 1877	Railroad workers went on strike in West Virginia. The strike expanded New York, Maryland and Ohio.
July, 1877	State militias and federal troops were dispatched to counteract the striking workers and to control the violence.
August, 1877	The strike ended. It was responsible for over forty deaths and destruction to railroad property. The railroads restored the wage cuts.
1887	The Interstate Commerce was established.
1901	The National Guard became a federally funded part of the armed forces with armories in a number of cities and towns.

The Great Railroad Strike of 1877 was not only the first rail strike in the nation's history but also the country's first general strike. In the years immediately following the Civil War, the United States experienced a boom in railroad construction that led investors to

speculate and to borrow money based on proposed projects. The bubble burst when the Northern Pacific Railroad filed for bankruptcy in 1873. This set off a financial panic that closed the New York Stock Exchange for ten days and plunged the American economy into a depression. In 1877, the Supreme Court upheld a series of laws that regulated railroad rates, and this also adversely affected rail profits. The Pennsylvania Railroad responded by doubling the size of trains and by cutting the salaries of employees. Other companies soon followed this example.

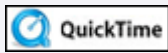
The new company policy caused thousands of railroad workers to walk off their jobs in protest. The strike was not affiliated with any union, but it paralyzed the transportation network and brought U.S. commerce to a screeching halt. The Great Railroad Strike drew over 100,000 participants in fourteen states. In major cities like Chicago and Pittsburgh, citizens came out into the streets, joined the railroad employees and protested a variety of injustices attributed to the railroads. When the Governor of Pennsylvania sent the state militia to break up the strike, protestors set fire to railroad property and overturned locomotives. Similar clashes occurred across the country and **President Rutherford B. Hayes** sent federal troops to restore order. This marked the first time in history that an arm of the national military was used to dispel workers. These riots resulted in the deaths of over forty people and an estimated \$40 million in property damage.



The Great Railroad Strike of 1877: Pittsburgh Pa.

By August of 1877, the Great Railroad Strike was over, but its effects are still debated by historians. In some instances, the railroads restored wage cuts and improved some

working conditions. However, many workers were fired or had their names placed on a **blacklist**, which was circulated to discourage hiring those who had participated in the strike. Industrial plants also heightened security by employing and training their own guards. The violence and property damage encouraged the U.S. government to establish the **National Guard** for the enforcement of order. Armories, designed after European fortresses, were built in cities and towns across the country. Ultimately, however, the Great Railroad Strike taught workers the power of unity and energized the movement toward labor unions.



Wages and Working Conditions (03:22)

Go to Questions 1 through 7.

The Rise of Labor Unions

The first effective labor organization that acquired some national membership was the **Knights of Labor**. Founded in 1869, the Knights enlisted all laborers and did not discriminate based on race, gender or field of employment. They believed that ordinary people needed to have input into policies of the companies for which they worked and proposed the establishment of businesses owned by the workers. Even though they viewed political action and education as the keys for accomplishing their goals, the Knights of Labor added the most members to their ranks following wildcat or spontaneous strikes. For example, thousands of workers on the Southwest Railroad walked off their jobs in 1885 to protest wage cuts. Afterwards, they telegraphed **Terence Powderly**, president of the Knights, and asked to join the organization. This event increased membership in the Knights of Labor to 750,000 and enhanced their public image. They used their status successfully to lobby Congress and acquired legislation to prohibit the entry into the United States of immigrants who had signed contracts to work for specific employers. In spite of their achievements, the year 1886 was a troubled one for labor relations. There were nearly 1600 strikes that involved over 600,000 workers, whose most prominent demand was the eight-hour day. Although some strikes were considered successful, others failed; the organization also experienced internal conflicts between skilled and unskilled members. These factors led to a decline in the popularity and influence of the Knights of Labor.

The Haymarket Riot

The most serious blow to the Knights of Labor came from a tragic occurrence with which they were only indirectly associated. One of the strikes called for May Day in 1886 was against the **McCormick Harvesting Machine Company** in **Chicago**. Three unions, including the Knights of Labor, had struck against the plant, but the group represented by the Knights had reached an agreement and returned to work. Fighting broke out along the picket lines on May 3; when police intervened to restore order, several strikers were injured or killed. Union leaders called a protest meeting at Chicago's Haymarket Square

for the evening of May 4. As the meeting was breaking up, a group of anarchists took over and began to make inflammatory speeches. The police quickly intervened, but a bomb exploded. The blast killed seven policemen and injured many others. Eight of the anarchists were arrested, tried, and convicted of murder. Four of them were hanged, and one committed suicide. The remaining three were pardoned in 1893 by Governor **John P. Altgeld** on the grounds that the anarchists had been convicted in a prejudicial atmosphere and that it was impossible to ascertain their guilt.



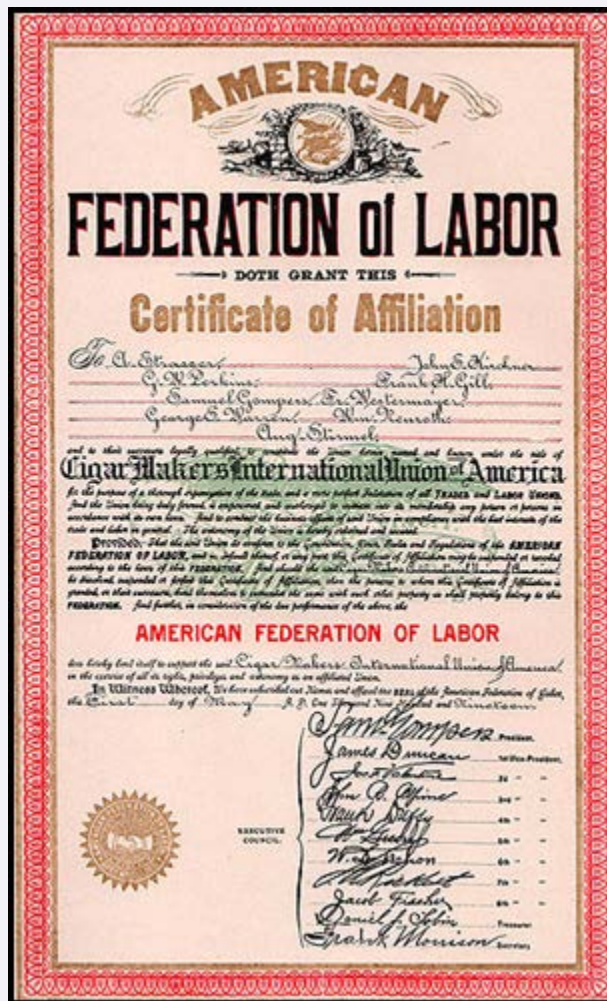
Poster advertising the meeting at Haymarket Square

The public blamed organized labor for the Haymarket tragedy, and many persons were convinced that the activities of unions were likely to be accompanied by violence. The Knights never regained the ground they lost in 1886, and organized labor seldom gained any measure of public sympathy until after the turn of the century. Membership did not again reach 1885–86 levels until 1900. Unions, however, continued to be active, and 1890s saw an average of 1000 strikes per year.

Go to Questions 8 through 12.

The American Federation of Labor

As the power of the Knights declined, the leadership in the union movement passed to the **American Federation of Labor (AFL)**. First organized in 1881 and reorganized in 1886 under the leadership of Samuel **Gompers**, this union was composed of groups of skilled workers or brotherhoods that practiced particular crafts and trades. For a few years, there was some attempt at cooperation between the Knights and the AFL, but the basic structure and philosophy of the two groups made this difficult. The AFL appealed only to skilled workers, and its objectives were those of immediate concern to its members: hours, wages, working conditions, and the recognition of the union. The key to achieving these goals was a negotiated agreement between the employer and a single unit of employees through a process called collective bargaining. When this did not work, the AFL relied on economic weapons, chiefly the strike and boycott; it avoided political activity, except for state and local election campaigns. Membership grew from 150,000 workers in 1886 to over 1 million workers in 1900, but the organization's reputation was tarnished by the events that occurred during the **Homestead Steel Strike**.



Labor Organizations (04:48)

The Homestead Steel Strike

In 1892, a union affiliate of the AFL called for a strike against the Carnegie Steel Company's Homestead plant to protest cuts in wages. In an attempt to end the strike and the union, **Henry Clay Frick**, one of Carnegie's top executives, locked out workers, built a three-mile wooden fence topped with barbed wire around the mill property and brought in three hundred **Pinkerton guards** to protect new workers hired as **strikebreakers**. The arrival of the Pinkerton guards resulted in a gun battle that killed three guards and seven workers. The Governor of Pennsylvania sent 4000 state militiamen to end the violence. Two weeks later, Frick was seriously wounded in an assassination attempt by Alexander Berkman, an anarchist with no union connections. In the end, the strike lasted five months and was a victory for the company. Although Frick recovered, prosperous Americans feared a worker uprising, and public opinion sided with the company. Employers took a strong stance against the unions by issuing yellow-dog contracts in which new employees promised not to join unions. The steel industry remained without unions until the 1930s.

Opposing Views on the Homestead Strike

"Three years ago our concern had an experience similar to this. We felt the necessity of a change at the works; that a scale should be adopted based on the sliding price of billets, and we asked the county authorities for protection. The workmen began tactics similar to those employed in the present troubles. The sheriff assured the members of the firm that there would be no difficulty; that he would give them ample protection and see that men who were willing to work were not interfered with. What was the result? The posse taken up by the sheriff—something over 100 men—were not permitted to land on our property; were driven off with threats of bodily harm, and it looked as if there was going to be great destruction of life and property. That frightened our people....

"The facts concerning the engagement of the Pinkerton men are these: From past experience, not only with the present sheriff but with all others, we have found that he has been unable to furnish us with sufficient number of deputies to guard our property and protect the men who were anxious to work on our terms. As the Amalgamated men from the 1st of July had surrounded our works, placed guards at all the entrances and at all avenues or roads leading to our establishment and for miles distant there from, we felt that for the safety of our property and in order to protect our workmen it was necessary for us to secure our own watchmen to assist the sheriff, and we know of no other source from which to obtain them than from Pinkerton agencies, and to them we applied."

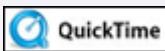
Henry Clay Frick as quoted by *Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette*:
July 8, 1892

The present troubles at Homestead are being studied closely, and are not to be taken lightly. Capital and organized labor have shown one breathing defiance, the spirit of rancor that forebodes suffering under the abuse of power which has established in its time their share as a right, but which workmen are robbed of.

It has become the instrument of oppression, masquerading as a philanthropy. It should be the protection of the American industries.

The significance of the Homestead strike is underestimated by any thoughtful person. If strikers are good, reasonable men, the application of their methods is a defiance of legitimate authority, and from which the country may see there to-day, and the discipline may become a united one and a better one. If laws are to promote the health of our industries must rely upon the law. It should have its full share of such legislation.

Editorial from *Pittsburgh Courier*:
July 7, 1892

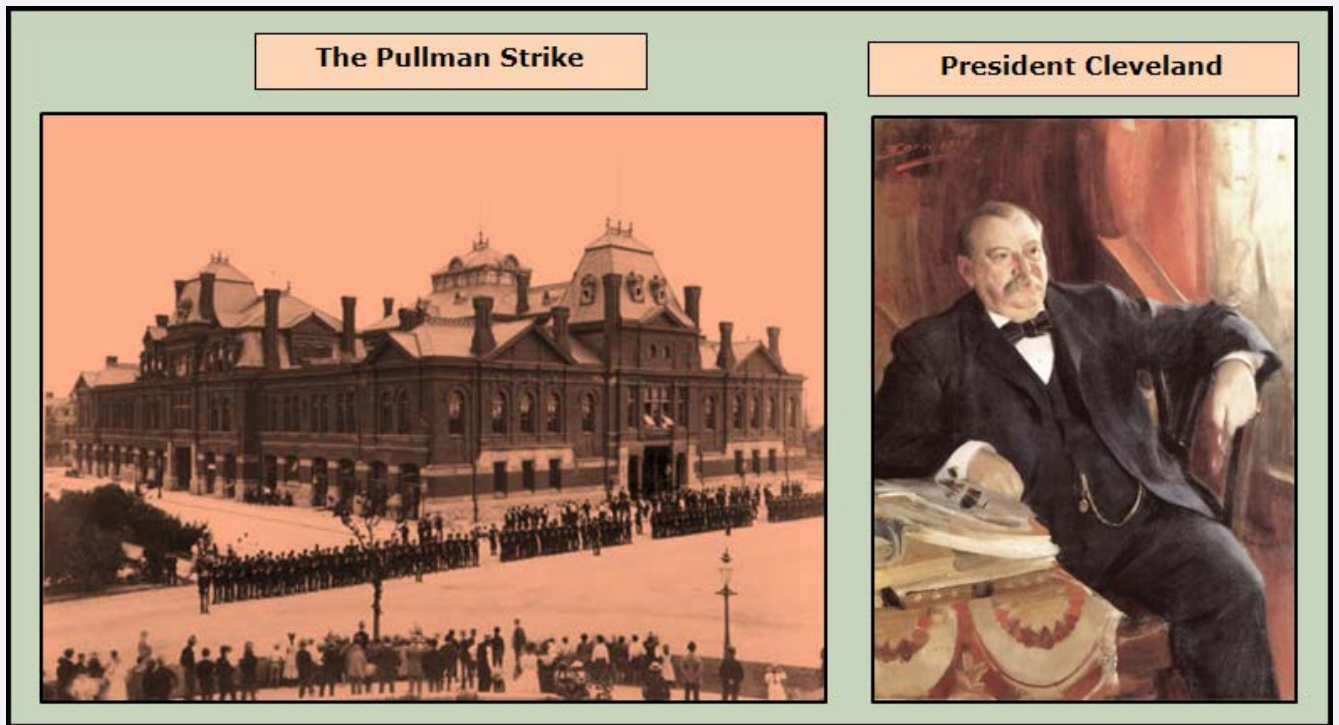


Homestead Strike 1892 (02:39)

Industrial Labor and the Pullman Strike

By the 1890s, industrial unions began to gain support. These organizations represented all the workers, both skilled and unskilled, within a particular industry. The **American Railway Union** (ARU) was one example, and it called for one of the nation's largest strikes of the nineteenth century in 1894. The **Pullman Palace Car Company**, located near Chicago and owned by **George Pullman**, was the country's largest manufacturer of sleeping cars for trains. In response to a downturn in the economy, Pullman scheduled lay-offs for over one thousand employees and cut the salaries of the rest. At the same time, he made no reduction in the rents charged to these workers for living in the company town of Pullman. Ninety percent of the company's work force voted to go on strike, and the action quickly spread nationwide when members of the American Railway

Union refused to move trains with Pullman cars. Soon more than 250,000 railroad employees had joined the effort.



With much of the country's rail traffic at a standstill, company executives requested assistance from the national government. The federal courts issued an injunction, which demanded that the strikers return to work. **President Grover Cleveland** enforced this order by sending 14,000 U.S. troops to control the situation. In Chicago, a crowd of 10,000 protestors came out to meet them. This confrontation resulted in twenty-five deaths and in over sixty serious injuries. Hundreds found themselves in jail along with Eugene V. Debs, the leader of the American Railway Union. Following his arrest, support for the strike quickly faded, and the Pullman firm succeeded in lowering wages. It also gave business a powerful, new tactic, with the use of injunctions to stop strikes.

Go to Questions 13 through 22

What's Next?

Industrial expansion within the United States and the accompanying demand for workers set people in motion at home and abroad. Greater job opportunities lured farmers from the country to the city, and many African Americans left the rural South for the urban North. Immigrants crossed both the Atlantic and the Pacific in the hope of finding better lives. In the period between the Civil War and World War I, over twenty-five million immigrants entered the United States; the 1900 census showed that, in New York and San

Francisco, more than 75% of the population had at least one parent who was foreign-born. Dramatic changes resulting from all of this movement were inevitable, and you will explore the impact of this mass movement in the next unit. Before moving on, review the names and terms that you read about in this unit; then, complete questions

Go to Questions 23 through 30.