



>> The Knights of Labor were sometimes portrayed in a comical fashion in the media.

 **Interactive Cartoon**



>> Many laborers sought better working conditions and better pay through unionization.

The recent alarming development and aggression of aggregated wealth, which, unless checked, will inevitably lead to the pauperization and hopeless degradation of the toiling masses, render it imperative, if we desire to enjoy the blessings of life, that a check should be placed upon its power . . . and a system adopted which will secure to the laborer the fruits of his toil. . . .

—Preamble to the Knights' Constitution, 1878

In 1879, **Terence V. Powderly** took on the leadership of the Knights. The son of Irish immigrants, he had worked as a machinist on the railroad before rising to become mayor of Scranton, Pennsylvania, in the 1870s. Powderly abandoned the secretive nature of the Knights. Under his leadership the union used collective bargaining, boycotts, and the threat of strikes to win gains for workers. But like Stephens, Powderly also pursued reforms intended to free workers from wage labor. He planned large-scale manufacturing cooperatives which members workers would operate and take a share in the profits. By 1885, the Knights had grown to include some 700,000 men and women nationwide, of every race and ethnicity. By the 1890s, however, after a series of failed strikes, the Knights had largely disappeared. Many Knights who worked in skilled crafts or trades abandoned the union for a new, rival labor organization, the American Federation of Labor.

**A New Organization for Workers** Samuel Gompers was a poor Jewish immigrant from England who had worked his way up to head the Cigarmakers' Union in New York. In 1886, Gompers helped found the **American Federation of Labor (AFL)** and served as its president for nearly 40 years. While the Knights of Labor was open to nearly all workers, the AFL was a loose organization of some 100 unions of skilled workers devoted to specific crafts. These trade unions retained their individuality but gained strength in bargaining through their affiliation with the AFL.

Gompers set high dues for membership in the AFL, pooling the money to create a strike and pension fund to assist workers in need. Unlike the Knights of Labor, the AFL did not aim for larger social gains for workers. Instead, it focused on specific workers' issues such as wages, working hours, and working conditions. In testimony before a government labor commission, Gompers argued in fact that unions and strikes were

## Influential Labor Unions

NAME	DATE FOUNDED	SIGNIFICANCE
National Trades Union	1834	First national union; open to workers from all trades
Knights of Labor	1869	Sought general ideological reform; open to workers of all trades
American Federation of Labor	1886	Focused on specific workers' issues; organization of skilled workers from local craft unions
American Railway Union	1893	First industrial union; open to all railway workers

>> Different labor unions continued to advocate for worker's rights. **Analyze Tables**  
 How were all of these labor unions similar? What were some ways in which they differed?

the only way workers' issues such as these could be addressed:

We recognize that peaceful industry is necessary to successful civilized life, but the right to strike and the preparation to strike is the greatest preventive to strikes.

If the workmen were to make up their minds tomorrow that they would under no circumstances strike, the employers would do all the striking for them in the way of lesser wages, and longer hours of labor.

—Report on the (U.S.) Industrial Commission on Capital and Labor, 1890

The AFL also pressed for workplaces in which only union members could be hired. Because of its narrow focus on workers' issues, the AFL was often called a "bread and butter" union.

The AFL was not as successful as the Knights in rapidly gaining the widespread support of workers, partly because of its own policies. It opposed union membership for women because Gompers believed their presence in the workplace drove wages down. While it was theoretically open to African Americans,

member unions usually found ways to exclude them. Nevertheless, by 1910 AFL membership had reached two million workers.

**? IDENTIFY** What similarities and differences existed in the goals of various labor unions?

## Labor Unions Lead Protests

As membership in labor unions rose and labor activists became more skilled in organizing large-scale protests, a wave of bitter confrontations between labor and management hit the nation. The first major strike occurred in the railroad industry in 1877. Striking workers, responding to wage cuts, caused massive property destruction in several cities. State militias were called in to protect strikebreakers, or temporary workers hired to perform the jobs of striking workers. Finally, the federal government sent in troops to restore order. In the decades to follow, similar labor disputes would affect businesses, the government, and the organization of labor unions themselves.

**Workers Protest in Chicago** In May 1886, thousands of workers mounted a national demonstration for an eight-hour workday. Strikes erupted in several cities, and fights broke out between strikers and strikebreakers. Conflict then escalated between strikers and police who were brought in to halt the violence.

On May 4, protesters gathered at Haymarket Square in Chicago. The diverse crowd included anarchists, or radicals opposed to all government. A protester threw a bomb, killing a policeman. In the subsequent frenzy, dozens of people, both protesters and policemen, were killed. Eight anarchists were tried for murder, and four were executed. The governor of Illinois, deciding that evidence for the convictions had been scanty, pardoned three of the others. The fourth had already committed suicide in jail.

The **Haymarket Riot** left an unfortunate legacy. The Knights of Labor fizzled out as people shied away from radicalism. Employers became even more suspicious of union activities, associating them with violence. In general, much of the American public at that time came to share that view.

**Steelworkers Clash with the Pinkertons** In the summer of 1892, a Carnegie Steel plant in Homestead, Pennsylvania, cut workers' wages. The union immediately called a strike. Andrew Carnegie's partner, Henry Frick, responded by bringing in the Pinkertons, a private police force known for their ability to break up strikes. The Pinkertons killed several strikers and wounded many others in a standoff that lasted some two weeks. Then, on July 23, an anarchist who had joined the protesters tried to assassinate Frick. The union had

not backed his plan, but the public associated the two. Recognizing that public opinion was turning against unions, the union called off the strike in November. The **Homestead Strike** was part of an epidemic of steelworkers' and miners' strikes that took place as economic depression spread across America. In each case, troops and local militia were called in to suppress the unrest.

**A Union Addresses Social Issues in a Pullman Town** In 1893, inventor George Pullman, whose Pullman Palace Car Company produced luxury railroad passenger cars, laid off many of his workers and cut wages by 25 percent. Although the economic slowdown plaguing the nation at the time justified this action to some degree, Pullman did not reduce the rents in his company town near Chicago, where his workers lived. In May 1894, workers sent a delegation to discuss their desperate situation with Pullman. He refused to negotiate and fired three workers. His other workers responded by going on strike.

When Pullman brought in strikebreakers, the workers turned to the newly organized American Railway Union (ARU) for help. Founded by former railroad worker **Eugene V. Debs**, the ARU was organized as an industrial union, grouping all railroad workers together rather than into separate trade unions according to the job they held. Debs believed

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## PULLMAN, ILLINOIS THE COMPANY TOWN

Pullman intended his clean, neat company town to protect workers from immoral influences. He chose a site 13 miles away from union organizers, strikes, slums, and saloons.



### COST TO BUILD

ABOUT **\$8 MILLION**

### POPULATION

1884 **8,500**

1892 **14,700**

Though Pullman was one of the largest employers of African Americans in the nation, few lived in Pullman.

### THE HOMES



**1,400 RESIDENCES**

Skilled laborers lived in apartments or row houses. The unskilled lived in tenements.

### AMENITIES

The company provided landscaping, painting, sewers, trash removal, and tenement cleaning. The town had a hotel, shops, a restaurant, library, theater, bank, school, recreation areas, and a single church.

### COST OF RENT



Rent in Pullman



Rent in adjacent towns

### REASONS FOR DISCONTENT

- Unable to own homes
- Subjected to home inspections
- Highest rents in the area
- Lack of ethnic expression
- No town government
- No religious diversity
- No alcohol allowed

**1894** Workers strike in protest over wage cuts with no reductions in rents.

**1925** Pullman porters organize to form the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the first African American labor union.

Sources: Historic Pullman Foundation; Illinois in the Gilded Age, Northern Illinois University Libraries' Digitization Unit

>> Company towns like this one provided everything workers would need, but at a significant cost. **Analyze Graphs** What reasons account for the workers' complaints about Pullman?



that industrial unions allowed workers to exert united pressure on employers.

The ARU ordered a nationwide strike against Pullman. By June 1894, nearly 300,000 railworkers were refusing to work on, handle, or move any trains that had Pullman cars on them. As the **Pullman Strike** escalated, the nation's railroad traffic came to a halt. Railroad owners cited the Sherman Antitrust Act to argue that the union was illegally disrupting free trade. Since the nation's mail moved by train, the federal government took action to end the strike. A federal court ordered a halt to the strike. When Debs defied the court order, President Grover Cleveland sent in federal troops to force the strikers back to work. Debs was jailed for conspiring against interstate commerce. Debs appealed his conviction, claiming that the government had no authority to halt the strike. However, the Supreme Court upheld Debs' conviction in the case *In re Debs* in 1895, ruling that protecting interstate commerce and the private property rights of the railroads was a lawful exercise of government power.

**The Impact of Labor Unions** The outcome of the Pullman Strike set an important trend. Employers, hoping to maintain profitability and thus create more jobs, appealed frequently for court orders against unions, citing legislation like the Sherman Antitrust Act. The federal courts and other federal officials routinely supported these appeals, denying unions recognition as legally protected organizations and limiting union gains for more than 30 years. As the twentieth century opened, industrialists, workers, and government continued to battle over numerous labor issues. Collective bargaining, strikes, and legislation would become the way of life for American industry.

In the decades after Pullman, the labor movement split into different factions, some increasingly influenced by socialism. By the end of the 1800s, Debs had become a Socialist. He helped organize the American Socialist Party in 1897, running for President in 1900. In 1905, he helped found the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), or Wobblies. The IWW was a radical union of unskilled workers with many Socialists among its leaders. In the first few decades of the 1900s, the IWW led a number of strikes, many of them violent.

**2 CHECK UNDERSTANDING** Why did workers increasingly turn to the strike as a tactic to win labor gains?



>> Eugene V. Debs, leader of the American Railroad Union, speaks to a crowd. Debs was known as a fiery and inspirational speaker.

## ASSESSMENT

- 1. Support a Point of View with Evidence** In the late 1800s, sweatshops and other factories were horrible places to work. What evidence supports this point of view?
- 2. Determine Point of View** Why does the concept of child labor in factories seem so terrible to us today when it was a widely accepted practice in the 1800s?
- 3. Compare** life in a company town with life today for a low-paid worker.
- 4. Generate Explanations** Someone's "bread and butter" is his or her means of support, or livelihood. Why was the AFL called a "bread and butter" union while the Knights of Labor was not?
- 5. Express Problems Clearly** Why did labor unions such as the Knights of Labor, the AFL, and the ARU have such a difficult time carrying out a successful strike?