

Growth of Labor Unions

Main Idea Workers organized unions in order to acquire better wages, benefits, and working conditions.

History and You Have you ever been a part of a group that was working for a common goal? Did the group achieve its goal? Why or why not? Read to learn about labor unions and their goals.

Dissatisfied workers organized into groups—labor unions—to demand better pay and working conditions from their employers. Earlier in the 1800s, skilled workers had formed unions to represent workers in certain crafts or trades, such as carpentry. These **trade unions** had little influence because each represented only one trade and were too small to be effective. By the mid-1800s, as working conditions worsened, labor leaders looked to expand their unions.

In 1869 garment cutters in Philadelphia founded a trade union known as the Noble and Holy Order of the **Knights of Labor**. Employers fired workers who joined labor organizations, so the Knights met secretly and used special handshakes to **identify**, or recognize, one another.

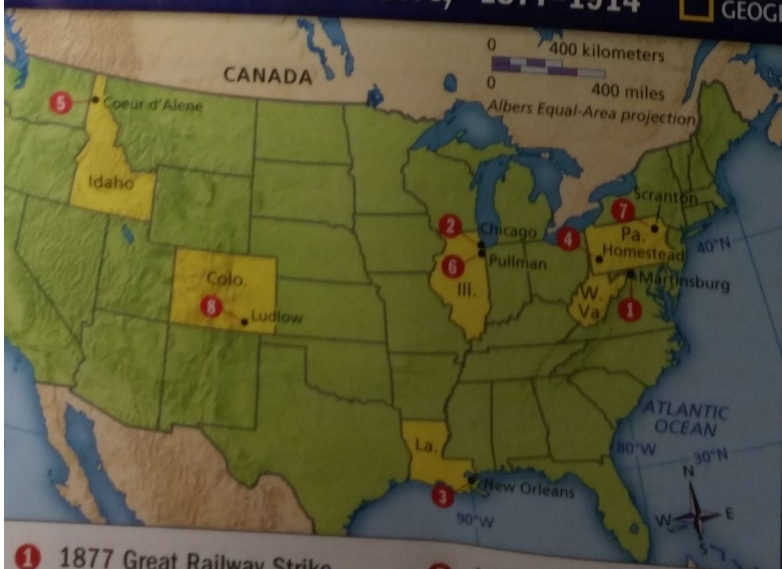
Under the leadership of **Terence V. Powderly**, the Knights of Labor became a national labor organization in the 1880s. Unlike most unions, the Knights recruited people who were traditionally kept out of trade unions, including women, African Americans, immigrants, and unskilled laborers.

The Knights of Labor grew to more than 700,000 members by 1886. A wave of strikes, however, turned public opinion against the union, and it lost power in the 1890s.

In 1881 a group of national trade unions formed the **American Federation of Labor** (AFL). The AFL represented skilled workers in various crafts.

The Labor Movement, 1877–1914

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC



Unions Struggle After the Civil War, labor leaders sought to organize large national unions. In the late 1800s, however, government opposition, internal divisions, and public disapproval limited the movement's progress.

◀ Unions gained strength in the late 1800s and worked more actively for workers' rights.

▶ Labor unrest during the Pullman Strike, 1894

1 1877 Great Railway Strike
Workers protest pay cuts

2 1886 Haymarket Affair
Laborers demand better working conditions

5 1892 Silver Mine Unrest
State jails hundreds of striking workers

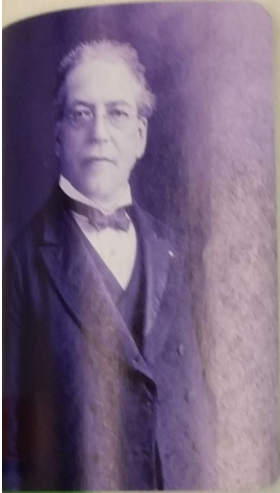
6 1894 Pullman Strike
Railroad workers demand better pay and working conditions

People IN HISTORY

Samuel Gompers

Leader of the American Federation of Labor

Samuel Gompers did not think that unions should always support the same political party. Rather, Gompers argued that unions should support any political party that worked for the unions' goals. He also believed the best way to achieve labor's goals was through collective bargaining. Gompers stressed that "the

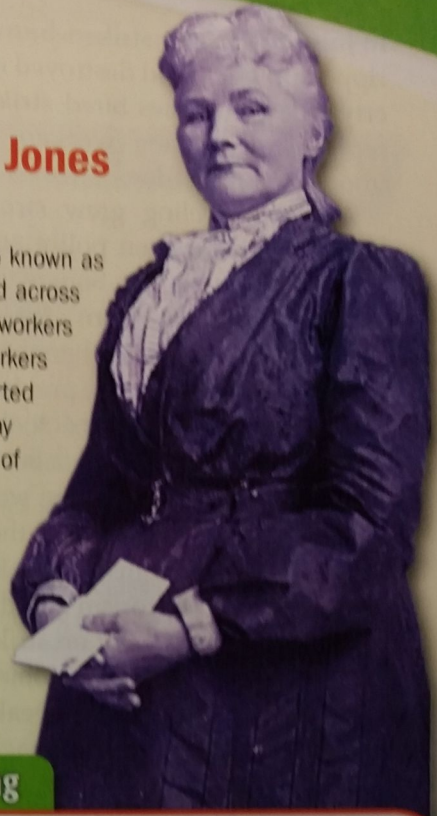


individual workman is as weak against the combination of wealth as would be a straw in a cyclone. Workers could only "stand on an equal footing with the employers" when they were organized into labor unions.

Mary Harris Jones

Labor organizer

Mary Harris Jones, also known as "Mother Jones," traveled across the country organizing workers for the United Mine Workers union. She also supported strikes and tried to sway public opinion in favor of unions. Denounced in the United States Senate, Jones believed that "there are no limits to which powers of privilege will not go to keep the workers in slavery."



CRITICAL Thinking

- Identifying** According to Gompers, how could labor unions help workers?
- Synthesizing** How did Gompers and Jones view employers?

The AFL was led by **Samuel Gompers**, the tough and practical-minded president of the Cigar Makers' Union. The organization pressed for higher wages, shorter hours, better working conditions, and the right to **collective bargaining**—when unions represent workers in labor discussions with management.

Although violent strikes turned public feeling against workers and unions in the late 1880s, the AFL survived and grew. By 1904, the AFL claimed more than 1.6 million members.

Women and the Unions

Many unions would not admit women workers, so some women formed their own unions. Mary Harris Jones, also known as Mother Jones, spent 50 years fighting for workers' rights.

In 1911 a fire broke out at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company factory, a sweatshop in New York City. The workers, mostly young immigrant women, could not escape because the company locked the doors to prevent employees from leaving early. Nearly 150 workers died. The disaster led the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) to push for a safer working **environment**.

The Unions Act

Economic depressions in the 1870s and the 1890s forced companies to lower wages and, in some cases, fire workers. Unions responded with large strikes that sometimes sparked violence.

After a financial panic in 1873, an economic depression hit the nation. To cut costs, companies forced their workers to take pay cuts.

In July 1877, angry strikers burned rail yards, ripped up track, and destroyed railroad property. The companies hired **strikebreakers** to replace the striking workers, and federal troops restored order.

Antilabor feeling grew stronger after a bloody clash between police and strikers in Chicago's Haymarket Square in May 1886. Striking workers from the McCormick Harvester Company gathered to protest the killings of four strikers the previous day. When police ordered the crowd to break up, an unidentified person threw a bomb that killed a police officer. Several more were killed in a riot that followed. Following the Haymarket Riot, many Americans associated the labor movement with terrorism and disorder.

In 1892 workers went on strike at Andrew Carnegie's steel plant in Homestead, Pennsylvania. In the attempt to weaken the steelworkers' union, plant managers had cut workers' wages. When the union called a strike, Homestead managers hired nonunion workers and brought in 300 armed guards to protect them. A fierce battle left at least 10 people dead.


Pennsylvania's governor sent the state's militia to Homestead to restore order. The plant reopened with nonunion workers, pro-

tected by the troops. After the failure of the Homestead Strike, the number of members in the steelworkers' union dwindled.

The employees of George Pullman's railway-car plant near Chicago went on strike in May 1894, when the company cut their wages. Pullman responded by closing the plant. One month later, workers in the American Railway Union supported the strikers by refusing to handle Pullman cars. As a result, rail traffic was paralyzed.

Pullman and the railroad owners fought back with the help of the government. They persuaded U.S. Attorney General Richard Olney to obtain an **injunction**, or court order, to stop the union from "obstructing the railways and holding up the mails." Yet the union and its leader, **Eugene V. Debs**, still refused to end the strike. Debs was sent to jail.

President Grover Cleveland sent federal troops to Chicago, and soon the strike was over. The failure of the Pullman Strike dealt another blow to the union movement. Despite these setbacks, however, workers continued to organize to campaign for better wages and working conditions.

 **Reading Check** **Explaining** Why were there growing antilabor feelings during the late 1800s?

Section 4 Review

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Vocabulary

1. Use each of these terms in a sentence that will help explain its meaning: **sweatshop**, **trade union**, **identify**, **collective bargaining**, **environment**, **strikebreaker**, **injunction**.

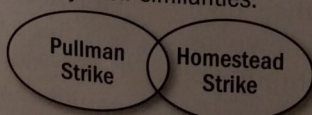
Main Ideas

2. **Describing** How were women and children treated as members of the industrial workforce?

3. **Making Inferences** Why did employers fire workers who joined labor organizations?

Critical Thinking

4. **Comparing** Compare the Pullman Strike and the Homestead Strike. Create a Venn diagram like the one below to identify their similarities.



5. **Evaluating** Were the early labor unions successful? Explain.
6. **Persuasive Writing** As a member of Congress, write a speech supporting federal child-labor laws.

7. **Answer the Essential Question** Why did workers form labor unions in the middle to late 1800s?

Visual Summary



Main Idea	Supporting Details
Expansion of Railroads	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> From 1860 to 1900, more than 163,000 miles (262,323 km) of new railroad track is laid in the United States. The width of railroad track becomes standard, simplifying transport by train. Improvements are introduced such as air brakes, linking systems, refrigerated cars, and sleeping cars.
New Inventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transatlantic telegraph Telephone Camera Vacuum cleaner Electric lightbulb Model-T car
Growth of Big Business	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> U.S. has plentiful resources, including those making up the factors of production—land, labor, and capital. A few giant corporations, especially in oil and steel, hold substantial economic power. Trusts and monopolies make corporations efficient but create less competition, hurting consumers.
Philanthropy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Carnegie builds Carnegie Hall, one of the world's most famous music halls, and more than 2,000 libraries nationwide. Rockefeller establishes the University of Chicago and New York's Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research.
Workers' Rights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Factory workers, miners, and other laborers work long hours, often under dangerous conditions. Trade unions, such as the AFL, expand in order to represent more workers. Workers strike in several industries, sometimes sparking violence.



◀ Pullman Strike, 1894



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