
The Revolution Of Labor Unions In United States During Reconstruction

As America healed from the Civil War and fell into the era of Reconstruction, a new revolution was around the corner. The increase in industry ultimately brought about America's second industrial revolution. The success of railroads, creation of steel, and greater immigration led to the boom in American industry. During the new revolution, Urban centers grew at a large scale which created new jobs and changed the standard of living for Americans. The new jobs required a lot more labor than before, employing more people. Wages changed and Americans became more dependent on being employed. Though there were more jobs, during the period from 1875 to 1900, organized labor was not successful in improving the lives of workers.

To begin, when there were labor strikes, they were generally quelled as they were seen as useless and had little to no results. During the Great Railroad Strike of 1877, an article from New York Times concluded that strikes were "hopeless" and considered them rash decisions made by men who did not understand what they were fighting for (Document B). In this strike, workers were fighting because their wages had been cut. In the end, many men were killed or jailed and the results were very minor. Later in 1895, due to the Pullman Strike, which was a large-scaled railroad and boycotting strike, the national government was given permission to regulate interstate commerce (Document H). Ultimately, the strike was not successful as the government eventually intervened to return control of the railroads. Another way workers were restricted was by being required to sign a contract. They would pledge their allegiance to their company and agree to not join labor unions while being employed there (Document E). This prevented workers from sticking up for themselves. Due to these contracts, the companies could maintain a tighter control on their employees so that they didn't disagree with their policies. This restriction was seen in the graphic image of Document F. The image is captioned, "Too many cooks spoil the broth" (Document F). Here we see that there were too many groups trying to control the organized labor. Because of all the efforts to control labor interest, conditions for the workers worsened.

Also, the daily circumstances of industrial workers did not change by much. Seen in Document A, within sixteen years, the average daily hours only declined from 9.9 hours to 9.4 hours. Labor unions typically strived for an eight hour work day. Although there was some improvement in the wages, it was quite insignificant. Men were also becoming less skilled and less significant in their jobs. As work became extremely subdivided into different components, workers only knew a portion of how to create something. In a machinist's testimony to the Senate Committee, he stated, "In the case of making the sewing-machine, for instance, you find that the trade is so

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subdivided that a man is not considered a machinist at all” (Document D). Because employees became less skilled, they became more dependent on their wage. If their wage had been cut, they now had less opportunity to find a new job since they only know how to make a miniscule part of a product.

Additionally, several groups were excluded from labor unions. When Samuel Gromper, a labor union leader, created the American Federation of Labor (AFL), most women, immigrants, African Americans, and unskilled workers were denied. Gromper acknowledged that, “The working people find that improvements in the methods of production and distribution are constantly being made, and unless they occasionally strike, or have the power to enter upon a strike, the improvements will all go to the employer and all the injuries to the employees” (Document I). However, the groups that were excluded from these labor unions had to face the harsher conditions of normal jobs. Meaning that life did improve for those who joined the unions, but not for those that couldn't.

Overall, during the end of the nineteenth century, labor conditions worsened for Americans. This was due to the unsuccessful strikes, insignificant changes in working conditions, and the fact that not everyone could be protected by labor unions. Although this era of organized labor ultimately benefited America in the long run, the workers of this time period did not get to enjoy these results.

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