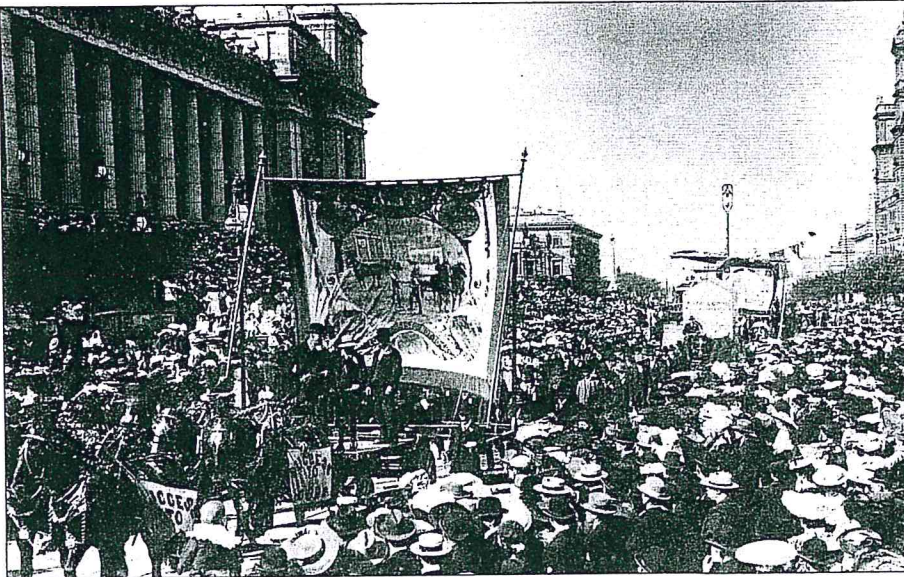


AMERICAN LABOR UNIONS: YESTERDAY AND TODAY

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Members of the Knights of Labor, one of the first national unions, protest in Chicago, demanding an eight-hour day, an end to child labor, and equal pay for men and women.

AMERICAN LABOR UNIONS HAVE HAD A ROCKY HISTORY. THEY STRUGGLED DURING THE 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURIES, GAINED LEGAL PROTECTIONS FROM NEW DEAL LEGISLATION IN THE 1930S, AND REACHED THEIR PEAK IN POWER AND MEMBERSHIP DURING THE 1950S. SINCE THE 1970S, HOWEVER, UNION MEMBERSHIP HAS STEADILY DECLINED WITH THE EXCEPTION OF GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEE UNIONS.

In the 1820s as the Industrial Revolution began to take hold in the U.S., employers had great power over workers. Employers, for example, could cut wages at will, place workers at unsafe machinery, and make them work long hours. The workers' only option was to either obey their bosses or quit and hope to find other factory jobs.

To improve their situation, groups of skilled factory workers began to form local labor unions. These unions were usually organized by skilled craft such as shoemaking.

Unions attempted to use their strength in numbers to fight for better wages and working conditions. If an

employer refused to meet their demands, union members commonly went on strike.

Employers resisted unions. They insisted that wages and other terms of employment were private contracts between themselves and individual workers. Employers claimed unions were illegal because they violated their rights of property and contract.

Union membership typically shrank during depressions when jobs were scarce. But once prosperity returned and labor was scarce, unions almost always rebounded, stronger than before. This cycle of union ups, downs, and rebounds held for more than 100 years.

In the 1860s, skilled workers began to form national unions. The Knights of Labor, founded in 1869, was the first national union to try to organize both skilled and unskilled workers in all industries. The Knights called for an eight-hour day, abolition of child labor, and equal pay for men and women.

The Knights disliked strikes and called for a third party to settle labor disputes between employers and their workers. As strikes multiplied

during the 1880s, however, leaders of the Knights lost control of their members who went on strike anyway. Many strikes failed, membership fell, and the Knights collapsed by 1900.

The American Federation of Labor (AFL), established in 1886, organized only skilled craft workers like bakers and carpenters. Led by Samuel Gompers of the cigar makers union, the AFL was not a centralized union like the Knights of Labor. Instead, the AFL formed a federation of largely self-governing national unions.

Up to this point, most unions had relied mainly on strikes to try to force employers to give in to worker demands. Employers fought back by hiring armed guards and by replacing strikers with non-union workers.

By the 1890s, some unions such as the United Mine Workers were using a new method, called the collective bargaining contract. A union would promise not to strike for a set period if the employer agreed to wages and other terms acceptable to the workers. When the contract expired, the union and employer could negotiate a new one and thus maintain labor peace.

At the turn of the 20th century, another union growth spurt occurred. In 1904, union membership reached a new high of 2 million members, about 12 percent of non-farm industrial workers.

Most employers, however, still refused to recognize unions or to participate in collective bargaining. Moreover, the mainstream union movement represented by the AFL ignored unskilled factory workers whose numbers were growing much faster than the traditional union membership of skilled craftsmen.

New Deal Labor Laws

During World War I, the government encouraged collective bargaining agreements to prevent strikes. Union membership increased to 16 percent of the industrial workforce. But after the war, the sudden drop in government spending led to mass layoffs and union growth stalled.