

## SECTION 7

# THE LABOR UNION MOVEMENT

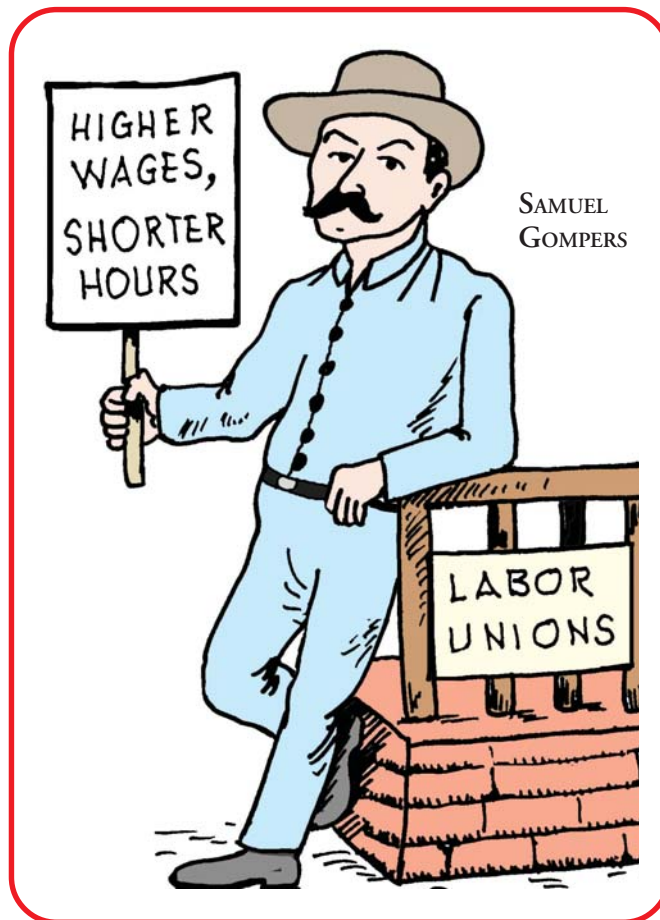
“All that harms labor is treason to America.

No line can be drawn between these two.

If any man tells you he loves America, yet he hates labor, he is a liar.

If a man tells you he trusts America, yet fears labor, he is a fool.”

—Abraham Lincoln, 1864



## 7-1 ★ INDUSTRIALIZATION'S IMPACT ON LABOR CONDITIONS

### CHANGES IN THE WORK FORCE

AMERICA'S POST-CIVIL WAR WORK FORCE GREW RAPIDLY, ESPECIALLY IN MANUFACTURING.

	Total work force	Workers in manufacturing
1870	12,920,000	2,130,000
1900	29,070,000	6,250,000



#### SOURCES OF LABOR:

- ◆ **Farmers** were the major source of industrial labor as farm machines increased production with fewer workers.

	Agricultural workers	Non-Agricultural workers
1860	6,207,634	4,325,116
1900	10,911,998	18,161,235



- ◆ **Immigrants** were the second most important source of industrial labor. Almost 12 million entered the United States between 1870 and 1900. By 1880 they constituted 13 percent of the population and 32 percent of the work force.



- ◆ **Women and children** increasingly were hired as workers because they could be paid lower wages. Most women worked in factories, but some became clerical workers in offices. Most children worked in textile mills, coal mines, and meat-packing plants.

	Women	Children (age 15 and younger)
1870	1,900,000	750,000
1900	5,300,000	1,750,000

(Source for the above statistics is Harper & Row Publishers' *Encyclopedia of American History*, edited by Richard B. Morris.)

### THE STATUS OF INDUSTRIAL WORKERS

With the machine age and the growth of industry, the status of American workers changed from that of artisans owning their own tools to employees running their bosses' machines. The resulting problems included:

- ◆ **Alienation**—Personal relationships between owners and employees vanished as corporate executives replaced owner-managers. Concern for workers' welfare diminished, as did workers' loyalty to employers.
- ◆ **Job insecurity**—Technical changes and seasonal lay-offs often caused abrupt unemployment with no compensation.
- ◆ **Physical danger**—Accident rates were high because of complicated machinery. Noise and dust dulled the senses and created health problems.
- ◆ **Loss of community**—Labor leader Samuel Gompers said labor was "atomized in the acid of individualistic capitalism." Workers labored only with the company of machines.
- ◆ **Low wages**—Between 1860 and 1890, factory wages increased only from an average of \$1.00 to \$1.50 a day. There was also, however, an increase in real wages, that is wages in relation to prices.
- ◆ **Long hours**—Factory hours ranged from 10 to 14 hours a day, six days a week. In 1868, Congress passed the first federal 8-hour day law. It applied only to workers employed by the federal government.

## 7-2 ★ BEGINNINGS OF THE NATIONAL LABOR UNION MOVEMENT

### Big business called for big labor, according to Gilded Age labor leaders.

Although labor unions had existed in America since the 18th century, there arose after the Civil War a new national labor movement in which workers joined forces to bargain collectively with employers.

A major question: Would labor unions reject capitalism in favor of socialism—the gradual abolition of private property, the collective ownership of the means of production, transportation, and communication? Or Marxian communism—a violent overthrow of capitalism in favor of a dictatorship of the proletariat (workers)?

No. A common characteristic of American labor unions is their economic conservatism. They chose capitalism.

Why?

According to historian Carl Degler, in America everyone is an “expectant capitalist.”

Mobility is possible. Many wage-earners climbed the ladder to improved positions, “white collar” jobs—even self-employment. Immigrants kept coming to America because it remained the land of opportunity.

Many of them earned enough to send money back home.

Meanwhile, laborers organized a variety of unions—successful and unsuccessful—that spoke in a collective voice to industrial America.



### NATIONAL LABOR UNION, 1866

#### FOUNDING:

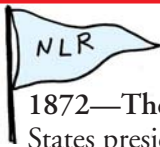
The National Labor Union, a federation of craft unions, was the first national Union. Organized in 1866 in Baltimore by William H. Sylvis, a Pennsylvania iron molder, it was called the National Labor Congress until 1868, when it became the National Labor Union. In 1869 Sylvis died, and Ira Stewart assumed leadership.

#### GOALS AND RESULTS:

- ◆ **8-hour work day**—In 1868, Congress passed the first federal 8-hour day law. It applied only to federal government workers. The NLU is important in labor history because of its influence in passage of this law.
- ◆ **Higher wages**—The NLU was the first union to argue that higher wages would aid the whole economy by increasing consumption, a point Henry Ford proved in 1914 with the \$5 daily wage.
- ◆ **Elimination of monopolies**
- ◆ **Equal rights for women, children, and African-Americans**—Too idealistic for the times; diffused efforts.
- ◆ **No strikes**—Led to weak bargaining positions.
- ◆ **Worker owned cooperatives**—Conflicting objectives among producers and consumers weakened the co-ops.
- ◆ **Political involvement**—Diverted efforts to achieve economic goals.

#### DEMISE:

In 1872 the NLU, too idealistic and impractical to survive the depression of the early 1870s, transformed itself into the National Labor Reform Party and devoted its efforts to politics.

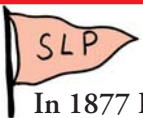


### NATIONAL LABOR REFORM PARTY, 1872

1872—The Labor Reform Party, the first national labor political party, collapsed when its nominee for United States president, Judge David Davis of Illinois, withdrew from the race.

Labor leaders concluded that a labor political party led nowhere. Thus, unlike Great Britain where trade unions helped create a labor political party, the United States has never had a successful labor party within its political system.

If a labor political party failed, might a socialist political party achieve labor's aims?



### SOCIALIST LABOR PARTY, 1877

In 1877 Daniel DeLeon founded the Socialist Labor Party. Its members, mainly German immigrants, were committed to Marxist class warfare. They tried to capture control of the trade unions. Failing this, in the 1880s they formed the Central Labor Union to challenge the newly formed American Federation of Labor, headed by Samuel Gompers. They accused Gompers of betraying workers by accepting the “wage slavery” of capitalism. In 1894 Gompers defeated DeLeon's socialists. Eugene Debs would lead another group of socialists into the new century.

The Knights of Labor, founded in 1869 by Philadelphia garment worker Uriah Stephens, was the first major labor union in the Gilded Age.

Would it solve labor's problems?

The Noble Order of the Knights of Labor began as a secret society with elaborate rituals that created a sense of community and camaraderie.

In contrast to the National Labor Union, a federation of unions organized around skilled workers in specific crafts such as carpentry, the Knights of Labor was an industrial union composed of individual workers, skilled and unskilled, in all trades. The Knights were inclusive, welcoming women and African-Americans. And they were open, welcoming "all who toil," *except* lawyers, bankers, doctors, stockbrokers, and liquor manufacturers.

In 1878 Terrance V. Powderly replaced Uriah Stephens as leader of the Knights of Labor. Powderly, the son of Irish immigrants, was a machinist from Scranton, Pennsylvania. He strengthened the union by discarding secret rituals (which made it possible for Catholics to join) and stressing union goals:



- ◆ 8-hour day
- ◆ Abolition of child labor
- ◆ Worker-owned cooperatives
- ◆ Boycotts and arbitration rather than strikes  
(Some members, however, did engage in strikes.)
- ◆ Graduated income tax
- ◆ Currency reform

Powderly led the the Knights of Labor to new heights in membership: from 10,000 in 1878 to 700,000 in 1886.

Nevertheless, the union peaked and collapsed before meeting most of its goals. The main reason: it was unfairly associated with the 1886 Haymarket tragedy.

### THE HAYMARKET SQUARE BOMBING, MAY 4, 1886

In 1886 a series of 8-hour day strikes swept the country, including Chicago.

In Chicago on May 3rd, four people were killed when police fired at an unruly crowd of strikers at the McCormick Harvesting Machine Company.

A group of anarchists, committed to overthrow of the government, called for a protest meeting the next day at Haymarket Square. On May 4th about 1,300 protesters gathered there, but rain and long speeches caused most to leave early. Only about 300 remained when police came and ordered the crowd to disperse.

From an unknown source a bomb exploded, killing and wounding several policemen. A riot broke out as the police retaliated with gunfire that killed at least seven people and wounded more than 100.

The bomb-throwing culprit was never found, but eight anarchists—seven of them German immigrants—were convicted of conspiracy. Four were executed; three still living in 1893 were pardoned by John Peter Altgeld, Democratic governor of Illinois.

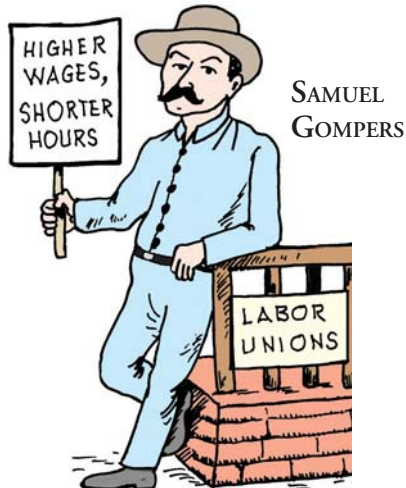
Americans' reactions? Fear and hostility directed toward anarchists, socialists, immigrants, and labor unions.



## 7-4 ★ THE AMERICAN FEDERATION OF LABOR AND ITS COMPETITORS

“The worst crime against working people is a company which fails to operate at a profit.”—Samuel Gompers

In 1886 the AMERICAN FEDERATION OF LABOR (AFL) replaced the Knights of Labor as America’s most important union. It remained so for the next half century.



In 1886 Samuel Gompers (1850-1924) of the Cigarmakers Union, founded the American Federation of Labor as an association of trade unions—skilled workers within a single trade group. For four decades he served as its president (except for one year): from 1886 to his death in 1924.

Gompers accepted capitalism and rejected the idealistic, social reform goals of earlier unions.

“The AFL is not a Sunday School,” Gompers said. It would focus on practical “bread and butter” goals such as:

- ◆ Higher wages
- ◆ Shorter hours
- ◆ Safe working conditions
- ◆ Employers’ liability
- ◆ Strikes

Gompers increased AFL membership to 1,700,000 by 1904 and almost 4,000,000 by 1920. When Gompers died, he was replaced by William Green, who led the AFL from 1924 to 1952.

### INDUSTRIAL WORKERS OF THE WORLD (IWW)

The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW or Wobblies), the polar opposite of the AFL, was founded in Chicago in 1905 by some 200 socialists, anarchists, and radical trade unionists (mostly members of the Western Federation of Miners). Its leaders included “Big Bill” Haywood, Daniel De Leon, Eugene V. Debs, and Mary Harris “Mother” Jones.

The IWW was a militant union with the goal of abolishing capitalism through strikes, boycotts, and sabotage. It disdained the AFL for working within the capitalist system. Its constitution called for class warfare, stating: “The working class and the employing class have nothing in common....Between these two classes a struggle must go on until all the toilers ....take and hold that which they produce by their labor....” During the years from 1905 to 1917 the IWW, with only about 60,000 members, won many of its strikes in the West (mainly against mine owners) and a few in the East (against textile mill owners.) The IWW declined after 1917 because of its opposition to World War I.

### THE CONGRESS FOR INDUSTRIAL ORGANIZATION (CIO)



JOHN L. LEWIS

In 1935 AFL member John L. Lewis argued for a return to industrial unionism as a better approach to huge industries such as autos, steel, and rubber. He organized fellow dissenters into the Congress for Industrial Organization (CIO).

In 1937 the AFL expelled the CIO, and it became a separate union.

In 1955 the AFL and CIO reunited as the AFL-CIO, America’s dominant union.



### WHY DID THE AMERICAN FEDERATION OF LABOR OUTLAST OTHER UNIONS?

According to Samuel Gompers “business unionism” offered the key to success. He considered unions a business operating within the capitalist economic system, the equal of big business and big government. Rejecting politics, he took an opportunistic stance toward all: reward your friends, punish your enemies.

**What is the future of labor unions?** Manufacturing jobs, where unions were strongest, steadily declined during the second half of the 20th century. In the first decade of the 21st century about 15 percent of American workers belong to unions, less than half the number in 1950.

## 7-5 ★ LABOR STRIKES BACK

Labor unrest turned into labor militancy.  
More than 24,000 strikes occurred between 1881 and 1900.  
Three of the largest affected the whole nation.

### THE GREAT RAILROAD STRIKE, 1877

In July 1877, near the end of a severe, five-year depression, workers on several eastern railroads went on strike to protest wage cuts. More than two-thirds of the nation's railroads were affected. Violence broke out in several cities as the strike spread from Maryland into Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Illinois. Philadelphia militiamen called out to quell riots in Pittsburgh killed twenty strikers.

At the request of four state governors, President Rutherford B. Hayes sent federal troops to stop the strikes and restore order. This action set a precedent for government intervention in labor disputes.

Labor union members resented Hayes' action and became more open to third-party movements.



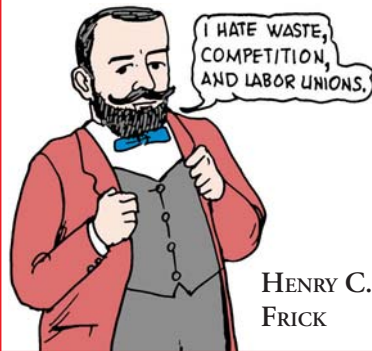
### THE HOMESTEAD STRIKE, 1892

In July 1892 Henry C. Frick, chairman of the Carnegie Steel Company, decided to crush the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers union at the Homestead Plant near Pittsburgh rather than renew the union contract for increased wages. Owner Andrew Carnegie, vacationing in Scotland, backed Frick.

When angry workers struck, Frick shut down the steel plant, hired strikebreakers, and brought in 300 guards from the Pinkerton Detective Agency to protect them. The strikers attacked the guards, and lives were lost on both sides.

State militiamen eventually put down the strike, and the strikers returned to work,

On July 23, 1892, anarchist Alexander Berkman attempted to assassinate Henry Frick. Frick recovered from the gunshot wound and also from public disfavor. The labor union, unfairly associated with the attack, displaced Frick as the villain of the Homestead strike.

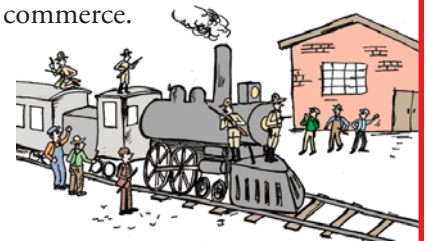


### THE PULLMAN STRIKE, 1894

In 1894 workers at George Pullman's Palace Car Company of Chicago called a strike to protest a cut in wages. (Hurt by the Panic of 1893 and ensuing depression, George Pullman had cut wages but not rents in the company town of Pullman, Illinois.) Many of the Pullman workers belonged to the American Railway Union (ARU), an independent union headed by Eugene Debs. The ARU supported the strikers by refusing to run trains with Pullman cars. This caused a national crisis.

The railroads' General Managers' Association persuaded President Grover Cleveland to have a federal injunction (a court order forbidding certain actions) issued to end the strike and to send 2,000 federal troops to enforce it. Cleveland did so over the protest of Illinois Governor John Peter Altgeld, justifying his action on the basis of safeguarding the U.S. mail, carried by trains, and protecting interstate commerce.

Eugene Debs and seven other ARU leaders were imprisoned six months for ignoring the injunction. In *U.S. v. Debs* (1894) the Supreme Court upheld their convictions and—in a severe blow to unions—validated use of the injunction to break strikes: the Court ruled that the Sherman Antitrust Act applied to unions acting “in constraint of trade” through strikes and other means. Not until the 1914 Clayton Act would this ruling be changed. And what of Debs?



At his trial Debs said he was not a socialist; emerging from prison he declared himself a socialist. What happened?

## 7-6 ★ EUGENE DEBS: THE MAKING OF A SOCIALIST

“I am in revolt against capitalism.”—Eugene Debs, 1908

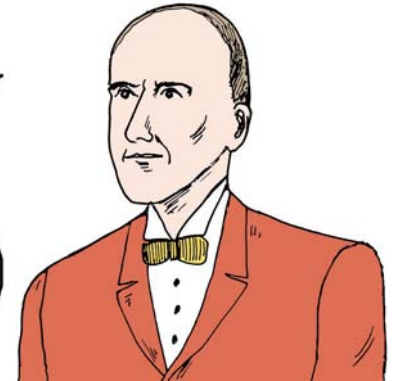
### IN THE BEGINNING—A MIDWESTERN DEMOCRAT

Eugene Debs (1855-1926) grew up in Terre Haute, Indiana, the son of immigrants from Alsace. He worked briefly as a railroad fireman, then as a billing clerk in a wholesale grocery firm. His heart, however, remained with railroad workers. In 1875 he joined the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, and in 1880 he began an eleven-year stint as Grand Secretary of Brotherhood of Railway Firemen and editor of its magazine. A Democrat, he won election in 1884 for one term as state representative to the Indiana General Assembly. Still active with railroad workers, Debs in 1893 organized the American Railway Union (ARU) in Chicago.

### AND THEN CAME THE PULLMAN STRIKE, 1894

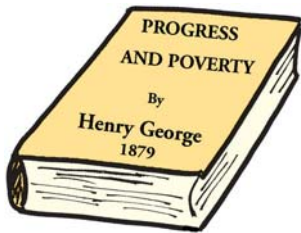
In his 1902 essay, “How I Became a Socialist,”<sup>1</sup> Debs said that during the violent Pullman conflict, he learned “my first practical lesson in Socialism, though wholly unaware that it was called by that name....” He wrote:

AT THIS JUNCTURE THERE WERE DELIVERED, FROM WHOLLY UNEXPECTED QUARTERS, A SWIFT SUCCESSION OF BLOWS THAT BLINDED ME FOR AN INSTANT AND THEN OPENED WIDE MY EYES—AND IN THE GLEAM OF EVERY BAYONET AND THE FLASH OF EVERY RIFLE THE CLASS STRUGGLE WAS REVEALED.

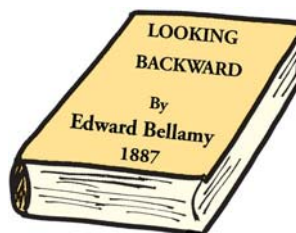


### A PRISON EDUCATION: HENRY GEORGE, EDWARD BELLAMY, KARL MARX

Debs spent six months in prison following his arrest for ignoring an injunction against the Pullman strike in 1894. In “How I Became a Socialist”<sup>1</sup> Debs described his gradual conversion to socialism during his prison term. “Books and pamphlets and letters from socialists came by every mail and I began to read and think and dissect the anatomy of the system in which workingmen, however organized, could be shattered and battered and splintered at a single stroke.” Early on, two popular books intrigued him, both bestsellers offering socialist solutions to poverty.

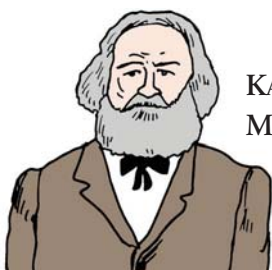


Henry George’s solution to poverty was a single, heavy tax on land, the ownership of which was a monopoly of the worst sort. This in effect would make land the common property of all.

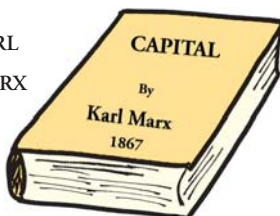


Edward Bellamy’s novel portrayed a blissful, utopian society in which business was nationalized (owned by the government) and private property abolished. Hundreds of “Nationalist” clubs exposed Americans to socialist ideas.

Debs wrote that as the “first glimmerings of Socialism were beginning to penetrate, that Victor L. Berger—and I have loved him ever since—came to Woodstock [prison], as if a providential instrument, and delivered the first impassioned message of Socialism I had ever heard—the very first to set the ‘wires humming in my system.’ As a souvenir of that visit there is in my library a volume of ‘Capital,’ by Karl Marx, inscribed with the compliments of Victor L. Berger, which I cherish as a token of priceless value.”



KARL  
MARX



### EUGENE DEBS: SOCIALIST CANDIDATE FOR PRESIDENT 1900, 1904, 1908, 1912, 1920

Debs tried to win the U.S. presidency for the Socialist Democratic party and the Socialist party of America, both of which he helped found. In 1912 he won 6 percent of the vote. His campaign theme, as he expressed it in the 1908 election: “I am in revolt against capitalism.”

<sup>1</sup>Eugene Debs and Bruce Rogers (eds.), *Debs: His Life, Writings and Speeches* (Girard, Kansas: The Appeal to Reason, 1908), 473-475.