

AP United States History
Unit 6: The Nation Expands
Topic- The Rise of Organized Labor

Explain the socioeconomic continuities and changes associated with the growth of industrial capitalism from 1865 to 1898.

As the price of many goods decreased, workers' real wages increased, providing new access to a variety of goods and services; many Americans' standards of living improved, while the gap between rich and poor grew.

The Rise of Organized Labor

During the Gilded Age, an American middle class began to grow for the very first time. Though the growth of the American middle class will be discussed on another class day, it is true that during the Gilded Age a modern America began to take shape. For some Americans, food was much more plentiful and cheaper than ever before. A family, even one living on a farm on the Great Plains, could order items— such as toys for their children, through the Sears and Roebuck catalog and have them shipped via the Transcontinental Railroad system. In just a few days, a family could travel from one part of the country to the other. To put it simply, more Americans could afford and have better access to goods and services than ever before. Even the wealthiest entrepreneurs of the period— both Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller gave away vast sums of money in acts of philanthropy which gave communities across the country access to theaters, libraries, and even new colleges and universities. With the advent of the electric light bulb, more people enjoyed the evenings and in turn, spent time in amusement parks, at the theater, and enjoying sporting events. But, with the rapid rise of large-scale corporations, the industrial titans who created them became some of the wealthiest individuals in the history of the world. However, despite their efforts at philanthropy, the wealth gap in America during the period grew tremendously. Which meant that for the American worker, life could be quite grim and their work could be extremely dangerous. It was the combination of low pay, long working hours, and the unsafe working conditions in the factories of America's large-scale companies during the Gilded Age that would influence the growth of the first labor unions in America. Despite their development, it would not be until 1938 that the vast majority of their goals would be realized.

Labor and management battled over wages and working conditions, with workers organizing local and national unions and/or directly confronting business leaders.

The first labor unions in America grew out of the tremendous growth of large-scale companies during the Gilded Age. During this period, the average worker made far less than they did by today's standards, worked in extremely hazardous conditions, and for very long periods of time. While a few incredibly wealthy entrepreneurs made more money than anyone else— perhaps in human history, this was not the case for those who toiled in their factories. Sure, it is true that Americans had access to phonographs, sewing machines, and the telephone, but during this period the average income was almost equal to the poverty line in today's money and if you were trying to feed an entire family, poverty became a way of life for most. During the Gilded Age, most American families could barely afford the basic necessities of life, but yet worked— quite often— more than sixty hours per week. Some Gilded Age workers worked every day of the week, including Sundays. For example, in 1890, most workers worked 10-hour shifts, 6-days a week. And, the work was extremely hazardous for most of them. Keep in mind that until the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of 1911 in New York City, in which 146 workers (most of them immigrant teenage girls who leapt out of the burning building hundreds of feet to their deaths) were killed, there were no such policies as safety codes for buildings in which workers toiled in unsafe conditions for very long periods of time. The following facts are important to bear in mind when thinking about

this period and comparing it to our own. During this period, on average 35,000 workers were killed in work-related accidents, compared to 5,200 workers in 2022. In 2022, the poverty line for an individual in America was \$13,590. During this period, the average individual worker made just under \$11,525 per year in 1880. By 1890, 11 million of the nation's 12 million families made less than \$1,200 per year— a paltry sum compared to the millions made by Vanderbilt, Carnegie, Rockefeller, and Morgan, which in today's money would be about \$40,500, and keep in mind, that for just a mere family of three, the new federal poverty line for 2024 is just above \$48,000. (To make that statistic sink in, it is important to remember that Gilded Age families were typically larger than those of today.) Due to the nature of the financial situation for most of the families during this period, child labor was quite common. Needless to say, that while the lives of most Americans improved during the period— compared to our own contemporary standards of living, the families (most of whom were migrants who had lost their farms in America's rural areas due to the rise of commercial farming or ranching, or who were immigrants) lived very difficult lives. It was these conditions which led to the development of labor union organizations in America.

Labor unions were created in the aftermath of the Civil War. The first major labor union organization was the Knights of Labor which was established in 1869. A secret organization of tailors in the beginning, it would expand to a membership of almost 700,000 workers at its height in 1885. Led by Terence Powderly, it would come to incorporate workers from every corner of the working class world. The organization fought for the following goals: an eight-hour workday, the abolition of child labor, equal pay for men and women (a novel ideal for the period), workers compensation, and safer working conditions. The membership for this union suffered after the Haymarket Riot of 1886 and it would be replaced by a much larger union organization, created by Samuel Gompers— which is still the most important labor union organization in America today, the American Federation of Labor, or the AFL. The AFL fought for narrower goals: an eight-hour workday, better wages, and safer working conditions for its members and for each person in the workforce. It was an organization that was composed largely of craftsmen. Today, the AFL is still going strong— representing workers across the spectrum in a variety of occupations and counts almost 900,000 members. However, it is to be noted that it was not until the passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 that labor unions won the right to have the 40-hour work week, 8-hour workday, the minimum wage, and safer working conditions enshrined into law as a protection for every American worker. Throughout the period, workers often participated in strikes to make their voices heard— some of them turned out to be quite violent and often turned the companies, the federal government, and even the general public against the labor union movement. But, these strikes would lead to one concession which we all still enjoy to this day— the very first Labor Day Holiday.

While there were a number of major strikes during the Gilded Age, a few of them stand out for their sheer violence, scale, and impact upon the labor union movement. The first major strike by workers in America was the Great Railroad Strike of 1877. With the nation still reeling from the Panic of 1873, which occurred with the rapid over-building of rail lines throughout America, this massive strike started when railroad workers on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad found their wages cut for the third time in a year and soon spread into other workers on the rail lines in other states. This strike had a huge impact in that it slowed down the nation's infrastructure and economy. Eventually the governors of several of the states amassed 60,000 state militia troops to put the strike down. Two trends came out of this strike. First, the scale of the strike and its effects on the economy did not generate sympathy from the general public. Instead, most Americans abhorred the violence, the destruction, and most of all, the disruption that it caused in their daily lives. Second, officials at every level of government— local, state and federal used force to put this strike down. It led to a cooling in the labor union movement for almost a decade, until 1886, when another major strike would divide the American public— most, again, would not sympathize with the labor union movement. At the McCormick Reaper Works in Chicago, Illinois, a protest on May 4, 1886, turned violent as a bomb was thrown at the police who were trying to put down the strike. Eight people were killed, and seven of them were policemen. It is to be noted that by this time the labor union movement was beginning to include a number of strikers who held more radical views (many of whom, were immigrants), such as anarchists (who believed that assassinations of public and business officials may be necessary to for impoverished workers to achieve better working conditions), socialists, and

communists who wanted to dismantle the corporate system that they viewed as oppressive for American workers— many of whom were also immigrants. In the trial which sought to punish those who had killed the Chicago policemen, eight anarchists were convicted and four of them were hanged— despite the fact that none of them had any evidence in their trial which linked them directly to the bombing. However, it led to a wave of anti-immigrant xenophobia across America and served as proof to many Americans that the labor movement was indeed, one filled with dangerous radicals. But, within the organized labor movement, it helped to galvanize them even further into being more determined to secure better conditions for American workers. In 1892, another major and violent strike occurred at Andrew Carnegie's Homestead Steel plant. The Pennsylvania militia was called-in to put down the strike. Again, in 1894, another major strike occurred. The Pullman Strike of 1894 slowed down America's rail system and had a tremendous impact. Though it would also lead to a further souring of public sentiment toward the labor union movement and it would also be put down by federal troops, it would provide the inspiration for the first Labor Day Holiday. By 1902, a new progressive minded chief executive, President Theodore Roosevelt, would finally take a different approach to the issue of capital vs. labor. When a massive coal strike threatened to shut down the nation with a terrible winter rapidly approaching, Roosevelt brought in both the managers of the coal industry and the workers who were at odds with one another and brokered a settlement that for the very first time, favored labor over management. Not only did the labor union movement receive a favorable settlement, but it also signaled to both sides that the treatment of both workers on the one hand, and the attitude of the federal government toward big business on the other was about to change in a very profound way.

The industrial workforce expanded and child labor increased.

As large-scale industries changed the nature of the way in which America did business, it also expanded the labor force, employing millions of Americans. The ranks of Americans that were employed by these large-scale corporations came from three differing sources: immigration from Eastern and Central Europe, former farming families displaced by the rise of commercial farming and ranching, and of course, child labor. From 1865-1900, the largest wave of immigration in American history brought millions of families from places such as present-day Italy, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Poland, Russia, Ukraine, Romania, Greece, Bulgaria, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Serbia to America for the very first time. While immigration will be addressed in another lesson, most of these "New Immigrants," settled in America's cities and swelled the ranks of its working-class. But, immigrants who had come from Northern Europe (Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, the Netherlands, France, Belgium, Great Britain, and Ireland), whose small farms fell victim to the tremendous growth and success of commercial farming and ranching in the West, were also displaced and made their way to work in America's factories. However, by 1900, approximately 18% of the American workforce was under the age of 16. Factory owners employed children because they were more compliant, less prone to be able to strike, and could both reach and fit into places that adult workers could not. Large-scale business owners could pay them less. Children worked in every factory setting, from separating coal from rock on small mine chutes, to sewing cloth to make dresses, and in fact, made-up almost two-thirds of the labor force in American agriculture at the time. Despite being abhorrent, and the tremendous activism to change the nature of the American labor force at the time, child labor remained a prominent feature of it, until the passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act in 1938, which finally brought it to an end. It was, therefore, immigration and migration which truly fueled American economic growth during the Gilded Age. It is immigration and migration that will be the focus of our next unit of study about life during the Gilded Age in America from 1865-1900.