

American Labor

The Labor Movement generated opposition from both the government and the public since they both saw unions as violent and lawless. The government used force to control the unions showing their disgust for the views and actions of these organizations. Well-organized and growing businesses took the advantage in the struggle with labor, so the workers started labor unions.

The very first labor union, The National Labor Union was started in 1866. This union lasted for six years and had 600,00 members. Its main principle was social reform. Its greatest victory was the eight-hour day for government workers. In 1869 the knights of Labor were formed, first as a secret society than it expanded to include all workers. They campaigned for economic and social reform among these was codes for safety and health, and producers' cooperatives. Terence V. Powderly, the leader of the Knights, helped

Them succeed the eight-hour day for other industries. He was known for saying "we (the Knights of Labor) work not selfishly for ourselves alone, but extend the hand of fellowship to all mankind." Many people to misrepresent the Knights twisted around this quote. The downfall of the Knights was a violent one. In 1886 they were involved in some May Day strikes, at about half of which they were failing. Tension was building in Chicago where 80,000 Knights lived along with a few hundred Anarchists. Then on May 4 labor disorders had broken out in Haymarket Square and the police were called. Suddenly a dynamite bomb was thrown that killed or injured several dozen people. The people wrongfully connected the Knights with the Anarchists, and the power of the Knights of Labor came to a dismal end.

The Homestead strike in 1892 was the first major strike to take place after the downfall of the Knights. It started at Carnegie's steel plant in Homestead, PA. When workers refused to accept new

Wage cuts. Henry Clay Frick shut down the plant and surrounded it with guards to protect the property. The infuriated workers soon ran the guards out when they realized that Frick had intentions of reopening the plant with strikebreakers. After a thirteen-hour struggle Carnegies Company persuaded the governor of Pennsylvania to provide help, the state militia was summoned to restore peace. The company began to bring in strikebreaker to replace employees who had walked out. Many of the leaders of the strike were prosecuted for rioting and murder. The steel workers' union was destroyed. Some members of Congress were sympathetic to homestead strikers. The public in general felt little sympathy for the strikers because they felt that the working person should remain free to sell services as an individual and not through a union. Many thought that the right to work was sacred. They felt that union organizers had no business interfering with the employee's decision to accept offers made by the company. The readiness of the federal

Government to enter disputes on the side of the business was decisively supported by people throughout the United States.

The Pullman Strike also played a main role in the labor movement. George Pullman, inventor of the sleeping car, built a model town for his employees near Chicago. In 1893, when the nation was faced with depression, Pullman cut his employees wages 25 percent without making a comparable cut in rent or in the cost of services. Debs instructed Union members at Pullman to avoid violence. Yet on May 11, 1894, 4,000 Pullman employees broke into brutal riots .The whole country was affected by the Pullman Strike. Since the strike was affecting the mail delivery and since railroad traffic had practically stopped in the western United States, President Cleveland ordered federal troops to come in and make the strikers work. When the strike continued the railroads obtained an injunction against the American Railway Union, forbidding it to interfere in any way with their operations. The public was not in favor of Debs and the

Strikers because the strikers were disorderly and violent, destroying the railroad and. The public and the

government agreed that the strike and the destruction had to be stopped the public thought of the strikers as a mob ready to wipe out anything in their path. Some people thought of the situation as war. Non-labor associates of the country (populist and other debtors) were incensed. They thought the brutal Pullman episode further proof of an un-holy alliance between big businesses and the courts. Rev. Herrick Johnson said, Violence was necessary expressing that even the church would allow violence. President Grover Cleveland said, " If it takes the entire army and navy of the United States to deliver a postal card in Chicago, that card will be delivered. Attorney General Olney and archconservative and an ex-railroad attorney, urged the dispatch of federal troops. The response from Washington defeated the Pullman strike, which made the conservatives happy.

Although the Labor Movement generated opposition from both the government and the public, they both saw unions as violent and lawless, and the government used force to control the unions showing their contempt for the views and actions of these organizations. After the Pullman strike was over the public quickly forgot about the labor fiascos, but employers and the government are still cautious of how far strikers will go. Labor Unions are still vigorous and still captivating battles but have learned from the past and no longer use violent behavior as a bargaining chip.

References:

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