Labor Conflict in the Gilded Age (1870–1900)

U.S. History Honors
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Essential Questions

What were **working conditions** like during the Gilded Age – and why were they so bad?

What are **unions**, and why were they necessary during this period? What **goals** did they seek?

This period saw arguably the highest labor tensions in U.S. History – indeed, historian Howard Zinn dubbed it the “**War Between Capital and Labor**”. Why?

What patterns emerged during the **four key labor conflicts** of the Gilded Age?

What role did **government** play in these conflicts – and why did it overwhelmingly back **capital over labor**?
Horrible Work Conditions

- Large-scale factories distance owners from workers
- Laborers often work 60+ hours a week
  - Carnegie’s 170,000 steelworkers typically worked 12-hr. days, 364 days a year
- Child labor rampant
  - No federal laws regulating until 1938

Horrible Work Conditions

- From mine to factory, miserable conditions & few rights
  - No minimum wage, no pensions, no healthcare
    - However, U.S. workers usually paid + than European workers
  - Seriously dangerous – and no workers’ compensation
    - 1880-1900: 35,000 American workers die every year
    - Highest workers’ death rate in the industrial world
    - Of all injured/killed, only 2% receive compensation
  - No protection against unemployment (One quote…)
- And, most attempts to organize or strike are crushed
- Powerful pix (by Lewis Hine) & a cheesy movie clip…
Steward’s “Declaration”

Ira Steward: labor leader, fought for 8-hour work day

1879: Publishes “A 2nd Declaration of Independence”

“Resolved, That the practical question for an American 4th of July is not between freedom and slavery, but between wealth and poverty… [W]hen the working classes are denied everything but the barest necessities of life, they have no decent use for liberty.”

“Resolved, That while the 4th of July was heralded 100 years ago in the name of Liberty, we now herald this day in behalf of the great economic measure of Eight Hours…”

“We call to the workers of the whole civilized world, especially those of France, Germany and Great Britain, to join hands with the laborers of the United States in the mighty movement.”

Labor: An Overview

Capital = General term for those who possess wealth

Labor = General term for working class

Union = Organization of workers with a common goal
    E.g., shorter hours, better wages, safer working conditions
    Why are unions necessary in the Gilded Age?

4 key episodes in Gilded Age labor conflict

1877: The Great Railroad Strike

1886: The Haymarket Affair

1892: The Homestead Strike

1894: The Pullman Strike
The Great Railroad Strike (1877)

- **July 1877**: Spontaneous strike by RR workers
- Poor working conditions, two pay cuts => strike in MD
- Spreads rapidly: Chicago, KC, St. Louis, Pittsburgh, SF…
- 10 states send **60,000 troops**
  - violence & chaos ensues
- **$100 million** property damage
- **100+ killed** (esp. in Pittsburgh)
- Suppressed after 45 days
- **1st** national strike in USH
- What had troops been used for earlier that decade?

The Haymarket Affair (1886)

- **May 1886**: **300k-500k**
  - protest nationwide for 8-hour workday
- **Chicago**: s/o throws bomb, police fire back, 11 killed
- In the end, 8 anarchists blamed => 4 hanged
The Homestead Strike (1892)

- Homestead, PN = Carnegie’s biggest steel town
- Amalgamated Assos. (the AA): steel union, ask for raise
- Henry Frick (Carnegie’s associate) counters w/ pay cut
- June 1892: Strike! The AA leads the charge…
  - Frick hires strikebreakers (“scabs”), Pinkerton detectives
  - Fight! Fierce battle => 9 workers, 7 Pinkertons killed
  - After two weeks, Frick convinces PN Governor to send in 6,000 state troops => the AA is dismantled, Frick wins
- Carnegie? In Scotland, but definitely backs Frick’s…

The Pullman Strike (1894)

- George Pullman: RR tycoon, runs IL company town
- Panic of ’93 => Pullman fires 2k, cuts wages by 25-50%
- June 1894: “Wildcat strike” erupts => American Railway Union organizes, Eugene Debs leads strike & boycott
- At its peak, strike involves 250,000 workers in 27 states
  - All railroad traffic west of Chicago stops!
- U.S. Gov’t uses Sherman Antitrust…to back Pullman?!
- Prez Cleveland sends in 14,000 fed. troops => 25 killed, strike crushed, industrial unions dead till Great Depression
- 6 days later, Congress & Cleveland create Labor Day
- Another silly clip summarizing these last 3 conflicts…
“Labor is prior to and independent of capital. Capital is only the fruit of labor, and could never have existed if labor had not first existed. Labor is the superior of capital, and deserves much the higher consideration. Capital has its rights, which are as worthy of protection as any other rights. Nor is it denied that there is, and probably always will be, a relation between labor and capital producing mutual benefits. The error is in assuming that the whole labor of community exists within that relation. A few men own capital, and that few avoid labor themselves, and with their capital hire or buy another few to labor for them.”

Speaker: