

Labor Disputes of the Late 19th & Early 20th Centuries

Labor Dispute	Issues & Outcome
<p data-bbox="556 224 955 251" style="text-align: center;">The Great Railway Strike of 1877</p> <p data-bbox="115 256 1386 787">By the spring of 1877 the United States was entering its fourth year of a severe economic depression closely related to a collapse in the railroad industry. Construction of new track, trains, and railcars had virtually halted. Wages were slashed for railroad workers. In 1877 the Baltimore and Ohio railroads cut wages 10%, which was the second cut in eight months. The railroads also laid off large numbers of workers. Newspapers began to report cases of starvation and suicide attributed directly to unemployment and despondency. Labor disturbances began in West Virginia in July and spread westward, gaining in violence and intensity. Resentful workers halted all freight traffic. Mobs in Chicago made up largely of non-laboring gangs of thugs roamed the rail yards and shut down those of the Baltimore and Ohio and the Illinois Central. In some cases striking workers burned railroad cars, derailed trains, and committed other acts of sabotage. The mayor of Chicago successfully called for 5000 vigilantes to help restore order. The National Guard was also deployed in several states. In one case, angry strikers armed themselves and confronted the national guard, forcing the soldiers to retreat into a roundhouse. The strikers then surrounded the soldiers and set fire to the building they were in. In the end, the strike was put down by a combination of military force and a blanket injunction (court order) prohibiting the workers from interfering with the operation of railroads and establishing a pattern of suppression used for a half-century.</p>	
<p data-bbox="556 797 945 824" style="text-align: center;">The Haymarket Incident (1886)</p> <p data-bbox="115 829 1386 1495">On May 1, 1886, labor unions organized a strike for an eight-hour work day in Chicago. Working conditions in the city were miserable, with most workers working ten to twelve hour days, often six days a week under sometimes dangerous conditions. On May 3 striking workers met near the McCormick Harvesting Machine Co. plant. Chicago police attacked the strikers without warning, killing two, wounding several others and sparking outrage in the city's working community. Radical anarchists distributed fliers calling for a rally at Haymarket Square, then a bustling commercial center. These fliers alleged police had murdered the strikers on behalf of business interests and urged workers to seek justice. One flier insisted they fight back with weapons. The rally began peacefully on the evening of May 4. Meanwhile a large number of police officers watched from nearby. Sometime later the police ordered the rally to disperse and began marching in formation towards the speakers' wagon. Just then, a bomb whistled over the heads of onlookers, landed near the police line and exploded, killing 8 policemen. The police immediately opened fire on the crowd, injuring dozens. Many of the wounded were afraid to visit hospitals for fear of being arrested. A total of eleven people died. Eight people connected directly or indirectly with the rally and its anarchist organizers were charged with murder. In their trial, the prosecution never offered evidence connecting any of the defendants with the bombing but argued that the person who had thrown the bomb had been incited to do so by the defendants, who as a result were equally responsible. The jury returned guilty verdicts for all eight defendants, with death sentences for seven. The sentencing sparked more outrage in labor circles, resulted in protests around the world and made the defendants international political celebrities and heroes.</p>	

The Homestead Lockout (1892)

The Lawrence Textile Strike (1912)

In the early part of the 20th century, Lawrence, Massachusetts, was one of the most important textile towns in the United States. Its principal mills were those of the American Woolen Company whose yearly output was worth \$45,000,000. The woolen and cotton mills employed over 40,000 people. Many of those were foreign-born immigrants on low-wages. It was estimated that about 50 per cent of Lawrence's textile workers were women and children aged under age eighteen. A report stated "A considerable number of the boys and girls die within the first two or three years after beginning work. Thirty-six out of every 100 of all the men and women who work in the mill die before or by the time they are twenty-five years of age." In January 1912 the American Woolen Company reduced the wages of its workers. This caused a walk-out and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), who had been busy recruiting workers into the union, took control of the dispute. The IWW formed a strike committee with two representatives from each of the nationalities in the industry. It was decided to demand a 15 per cent increase in wages, double-time for overtime work and a 55 hour week. The mayor of Lawrence called in the local militia and attempts were made to stop the workers from picketing. Thirty-six of the workers were arrested. Money was collected throughout America to help the strikers. A network of soup kitchens and food distribution stations were set up and striking families received from \$2 to \$5 cash a week. Dynamite was found in Lawrence and newspapers accused strikers of being responsible. However it was soon discovered that the American Woolen Company had paid a man \$500 to plant the explosives in an attempt to discredit the IWW. The governor of Massachusetts ordered in the state militia and during one demonstration, a fifteen-year old boy was killed by a militiaman's bayonet. Soon afterwards a female striker was shot dead. Faced with growing bad publicity, on 12th March, 1912, the American Woolen Company accepted all of the strikers' demands. By the end of the month, the rest of the other textile companies in Lawrence also agreed to pay the higher wages.

Discussion Questions

1. What generalizations can be made about labor strikes in the late 19th and early 20th centuries?
2. Some labor historians have used the phrase "industrial warfare" to describe this period. Is this an accurate label? Explain.