

Labor Unions Struggle Against Big Business

In the years after the Civil War, workers often felt ignored by their employers. For the most part, unskilled laborers had little bargaining power. If a worker wasn't happy with his job, hundreds of others would gladly take it. Employers showed little interest in their welfare, and some workers decided that only by joining together could they get attention.

The National Labor Union (NLU) was formed in 1866; but its leader, William Silvis, faced so much opposition from employers that he shifted his emphasis to reform causes. Small groups like the Molly Maguires met opposition from nearly everyone. The Mollys engaged in violent activities in the Pennsylvania coal mining region, murdering mine superintendents and destroying mine property. The Pinkerton detectives were brought in by the mine owners and got enough evidence to convict and sentence ten Molly leaders to death and fourteen others to long prison terms.



Irish Miners

The Knights of Labor was first led by Uriah Stephens and later by Terence Powderly. The Knights was to be a secret organization uniting all workers in honorable occupations. Although Powderly did not care for strikes, others within the union were successful in a strike against Jay Gould's railroads in the West, and the organization grew from 100,000 to 700,000 members. When the Knights attempted another strike against Gould in 1886, he went after them and broke the strike. While that strike was going on, workers in Chicago struck against the McCormick Harvester plant, and a group of immigrant radicals threatened to use the strike as the basis for a revolution. A rally was called at the Haymarket Square. As police converged on the crowd, someone threw a bomb that killed one policeman and injured others. Eight radicals were arrested, and even though there was no evidence that any of them threw the bomb or even knew about it, they were convicted of the murder of the policeman. The Knights were blamed for the whole affair, and membership dropped rapidly.

At the same time the Knights were going down, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) was coming up. Its leader, Samuel Gompers, saw the mistakes of other labor movements and avoided many of them. Each craft in the AFL kept a separate identity, but when one part went on strike, the others followed. Gompers was asked what his philosophy was, and he answered simply, "More." He did not quarrel with the capitalist system. He wanted the AFL to reward its political friends and defeat its enemies in a bipartisan way. He avoided radical views like communism and socialism.

Management used several tools to fight unions. The *injunction* was a court order forbidding a strike. The *yellow dog contract* was a promise signed by the workers that they would not join a union. A *lockout* closed the plant during a labor disturbance. *Company towns* were used by some employers to house their workers. In case of a strike, the rent stayed the same.

RESULTS: Workers were at a disadvantage when they argued with employers, and unions were weak until the 1930s.

