

Class Notes: Industrialization and the Working Class

Section 1:

Labor conflict was never more contentious or violent in the United States than during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when bloody confrontations wracked the railroad, steel, and mining industries. During the early 1880s, there were about 500 **strikes** a year involving about 150,000 workers. By the 1890, the number had climbed to a thousand a year involving 700,000 workers a year, and by the early 1900s, the number of strikes had climbed to 4,000 annually. Some 500 times government sent in militias or federal troops to put down labor strikes. While most labor clashes took place in the mines and mills of the east and Midwest, bloody incidents involving private police forces, state militias, and federal troops also took place on the New Orleans and San Francisco waterfronts and in the mining districts of Colorado and Idaho.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, labor struggles were more acute in the United States than in many European countries. Today, in contrast, labor relations in the United States are more cooperative and less conflict-ridden than elsewhere. The story of how the United States forged an enduring and workable system of collective bargaining after more than half a century of bitter struggles is one of the most important themes in modern American history.

Section 2:

In 1905, Werner Sombart, a German social democrat who became a Nazi party supporter in the 1930s, asked why the American working class--unlike the workers in every other industrialized country--never produced a genuinely mass-based political party of its own. In Europe, the working class created Labor, Social Democratic, and Socialist parties with massive popular support; in sharp contrast, American workers threw their support to the Democratic and Republican Parties, which were broad-based coalitions that included business, middle-class, and labor interests.

Sombart's explanation was that the political and economic position of the American working class made it much more conservative than its European counterpart. In contrast to Europe, where the **working class** had to struggle to win the vote, universal manhood suffrage was the practice in the United States. Further, American workers, Sombart insisted, enjoyed a much higher standard of living than their European counterpart and had a much greater chance to rise into the middle class.

Sombart overestimated the economic well being of the American working class. While the average income of industrial workers in the United States were indeed higher than in Europe, between 1860 and 1913, working-class wages, adjusted for inflation, rose more slowly than in Britain, France, Germany, or Sweden. In addition, the American economy between the Civil War and World War I was even more subject to boom and bust cycles than the economies of other industrial countries.

During the late 19th century, the average American worker was jobless for three or four months a year due to illness, inclement weather, or seasonal unemployment.

In the late 19th century, the average income of an urban worker was only about \$400 or \$500 a year, a sum insufficient to support a family. The remainder was made up by wives and especially by older children. Children under the age of 16 contributed about 20 percent of the income. These children worked not because their parents were heartless, but because their earnings were absolutely essential for their family's well-being.

Section 3:

Many American workers experienced the economic transformations of the late 19th century in terms of a wrenching loss of status. For free white men, pre-Civil War America, more than any previous society, was a society of independent producers and property holders. Farmers, shopkeepers, and craftsmen generally owned the property they worked. About four-fifths of free adult men owned property on the eve of the Civil War. High rates of physical mobility combined with the availability of western lands to foster a sense that the opportunity to acquire property was available to anyone who had sufficient industry and initiative.

After the Civil War, however, many American workers feared that their status was rapidly eroding. The expanding size of factories made relations between labor and management increasingly impersonal. Mechanization allowed many industries to substitute semi-skilled and unskilled laborers for skilled craft workers. A massive influx of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe saturated labor markets, slowing the growth of working-class incomes.

Echoing earlier debates over slavery, many working men and women feared that the great industrialists were imposing a new form of feudalism in America, which was reducing "freemen" to "**wage slaves**." They demanded "*a fair day's wages for a fair day's work*" and an **eight-hour work day**. Native-born workers, fearing competition from low-wage immigrant workers, sometimes agitated for immigration restriction. Many observers feared that the United States was on the brink of a ruinous class war.

At the end of the 19th century, American workers intensely debated how they could best defend their interests in the face of powerful national corporations. One of the most contentious questions that late 19th century workers debated was whether labor should agitate for higher wages, shorter hours, and better working conditions, or for more fundamental transformations in the nation's economy. Some of the earliest labor organizations called for a "cooperative" rather than a corporate economy, built around worker-controlled producer cooperatives.

Another source of controversy was whether unions should try to organize whole industries (what are called **industrial unions**) or organize particular skilled crafts (**craft unions**). Unlike unskilled or semi-skilled craft workers who could be easily replaced by immigrant labor, skilled craft workers, the "aristocracy of labor," had greater power to bargain with employers.

What was at stake in these debates was the very meaning of American democracy in a modern, industrial society. Among the crucial questions was government's role in labor disputes: Would government, at the local, state, and federal levels, align itself with labor or management?

Section 4:

The total miles of railroad track in the United States increased from just 23 in 1830 to 35,000 by the end of the Civil War to a peak of 254,000 in 1916. By the eve of World War I, railroads employed one out of every 25 American workers. The industry's growth was accompanied by bitter labor disputes. Many of the nation's most famous strikes involved the railroads.

The Great Railroad Strike of 1877 was the country's first major rail strike and witnessed the first general strike in the nation's history. The strikes and the violence it spawned briefly paralyzed the country's commerce and led governors in ten states to mobilize 60,000 militia members to reopen rail traffic. The strike would be broken within a few weeks, but it helped set the stage for later violence in the 1880s and 1890s, including the **Haymarket Square** bombing in Chicago in 1886, the **Homestead Steel Strike** near Pittsburgh in 1892, and the **Pullman Strike** in 1894.

In 1877, northern railroads, still suffering from the Financial Panic of 1873, began cutting salaries and wages. The cutbacks prompted strikes and violence with lasting consequences. In May the Pennsylvania Railroad, the nation's largest railroad company, cut wages by 10 percent and then, in June, by another 10 percent. Other railroads followed suit. On July 13, the Baltimore & Ohio line cut the wages of all employees making more than a dollar a day by 10 percent. It also slashed the workweek to just two or three days. Forty disgruntled locomotive firemen walked off the job. By the end of the day, workers blockaded freight trains near Baltimore and in West Virginia, allowing only passenger traffic to get through.

Also in July, the Pennsylvania Railroad announced that it would double the length of all eastbound trains from Pittsburgh with no increase in the size of their crews. Railroad employees responded by seizing control of the rail yard switches, blocking the movement of trains.

Soon, violent strikes broke out in Baltimore, Chicago, Kansas City, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, and San Francisco. Governors in Maryland, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia called out their state militias. In Baltimore, Charles A. Malloy, a 20-year-old volunteer in the Maryland National Guard, described the scene: *"We met a mob, which blocked the streets. They came armed with stones and as soon as we came within reach they began to throw at us."* Fully armed and with bayonets fixed, the militia fired, killing 10, including a newsboy and a 16-year-old student. The shootings sparked a rampage. Protesters burned a passenger car, sent a locomotive crashing into a side full of freight cars, and cut fire hoses. At the height of the melee, 14,000 rioters took to the streets. Maryland's governor telegraphed President Rutherford Hayes and asked for troops to protect Baltimore.

"The strike," an anonymous Baltimore merchant wrote, *"is not a revolution of fanatics willing to fight for an idea. It is a revolt of working men against low prices of labor, which have not been accomplished with corresponding low prices of food, clothing and house rent."*

In Pittsburgh, where the local militia sympathized with the rail workers, the governor called in National Guard troops from Philadelphia. The troops fired into a crowd, killing more than 20 civilians, including women and at least three children. A newspaper headline read:

Shot in Cold Blood by the Roughs of Philadelphia. The Lexington of the Labor Conflict at Hand. The Slaughter of Innocents.

An angry crowd forced the Philadelphia troops to retreat to a roundhouse in the railroad complex, and set engines, buildings, and equipment ablaze. Fires raced through parts of the city, destroying 39 buildings, 104 engines, 46 passenger cars, and over 1,200 freight cars. The Pennsylvania Railroad claimed losses of more than \$4 million in Pittsburgh.

When the National Guard was at last able to evacuate the roundhouse, it was harassed by strikers and rioters. A legislative report said that the National Guard forces *"were fired at from second floor windows, from the corners of the streets...they were also fired at from a police station, where eight or ten policemen were in uniform."* Militia and federal troops opened the railroad in Pittsburgh and Reading, Pa. was occupied by U.S. Army troops.

It appears that some 40 people were killed in the violence in Pittsburgh. Across the country more than a hundred died, including eleven in Baltimore and a dozen in Reading, Pa. By the end of July, most strike activity was over. But labor strikes in the rail yards recurred from 1884 to 1886 and from 1888 to 1889 and again in 1894.

Native-born Americans tended to blame the labor violence on foreign agitators. *"It was evident,"* said the Annals of the Great Strikes in the United States, published in 1877, *"that there were agencies at work outside the workingmen's strike. The people engaged in these riots were not railroad strikers. The Internationalists had something to do with creating scenes of bloodshed.... The scenes...in the city of Baltimore were not unlike those which characterized the events in the city of Paris during the reign of the Commune in 1870."*

Section 5:

An explosion in Chicago in 1886 helped to shift the labor movement toward "bread-and-butter" unionism.

On May 1, 1886, thousands of people in Chicago began demonstrations in behalf of an eight-hour workday. The marchers' slogan was, *"Eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, eight hours for what we will."*

On May 4, 1886, a deadly confrontation between police and protesters erupted at Chicago's **Haymarket Square**. A labor strike was in progress at the McCormick farm equipment works, and police and Pinkerton security guards had shot several workers.

A public demonstration had been called to protest police violence. Eyewitnesses later described a *"peaceful gathering of upwards of 1,000 people listening to speeches and singing songs when authorities began to move in and disperse the crowd."* Suddenly a bomb exploded, followed by pandemonium and an exchange of gunfire. Eleven people were killed including seven police officers. More than a hundred were injured.

The Chicago Tribune railed against "*the McCormick insurrectionists.*" Authorities hurriedly rounded up 31 suspects. Eventually, eight men, "*all with foreign sounding names*" as one newspaper put it, were indicted on charges of conspiracy and murder.

No evidence tied the accused to the explosion of the bomb. Several of the suspects had not attended the rally. But all were convicted and sentenced to death. Four were quickly hanged and a fifth committed suicide in his cell. Then, the Illinois Governor, **Richard Ogelsby**, who had privately expressed doubts "*that any of the men were guilty of the crime,*" commuted the remaining men's death sentences to life in prison.

Illinois's new governor, **John Peter Altgeld**, pardoned the three surviving men. A German born immigrant who had enlisted in the Union army at the age of 15, Altgeld declared, "*The deed to sentencing the Haymarket men was wrong, a miscarriage of justice. And the truth is that the great multitudes annually arrested are poor, the unfortunate, the young and the neglected. In short, our penal machinery seems to recruit its victims from among those who are fighting an unequal fight in the struggle for existence.*"

After granting the pardon, he said to the famous attorney Clarence Darrow: "*Let me tell you that from this day, I am a dead man, politically.*" There was an immediate outcry. The Washington Post asked rhetorically: "*What would one expect from a man like Altgeld, who is, of course, an alien himself?*" The Chicago Tribune stated that the governor "*does not reason like an American, does not feel like one, and consequently does not behave like one.*"

In 1889, the **American Federation of Labor** delegate to the **International Labor Congress** in Paris proposed May 1 as international Labor Day. Workers were to march for an eight-hour day, democracy, the right of workers to organize, and to memorialize the eight "*Martyrs of Chicago.*"

Section 6:

Originally built in 1880 and 1881 by local merchants, the **Homestead Works** was purchased by industrialist **Andrew Carnegie**, who installed open-hearth furnaces and electricity in order to boost the plant's efficiency and reduce the need for skilled labor. Carnegie's steel mills produced armor for battleships, rails for western railroads, and beams, girders, and steel plates for bridges and skyscrapers.

Carnegie's drive for efficiency also led to an armed confrontation at Homestead. In contract talks in 1892, **Henry Clay Frick**, the superintendent of the Carnegie Steel Company, proposed to cut workers' wages, arguing that increased efficiency had inflated salaries. Frick also wanted to eliminate the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers union from the plant.

When the negotiations broke down, Frick shut down the mill, installed three-miles of wooden fence topped with barbed wire around the mill, and hired 300 guards supplied by the Pinkerton Detective Agency. The guards were placed aboard two company barges in Pittsburgh for the trip up the Monongahela River to nearby Homestead.

On July 6, the guards were confronted by hundreds of workers and townsfolk. In the gun battle that ensued, seven workers and three Pinkerton guards were killed. Twelve hours after the battle for Homestead began, the guards surrendered.

The union's apparent victory was short-lived. Within days, 8,500 members of the National Guard took control of the plant. When Frick was seriously wounded in an assassination attempt in his Pittsburgh office, **public opinion** turned against the steel workers' union. By November, the union had been broken and the mill had reopened as a non-union plant using African American and eastern European workers. Union leaders were blacklisted from the steel industry for life.

One of the strike's consequences was that the steel mills shifted from an eight hour to a 12-hour a day, six-day work week, with a 24-hour shift (followed by a day off), every two weeks. It would be some 44 years before the steel industry would again be unionized.

Section 7:

The **rise of the American Federation of Labor** did not spell the disappearance of more radical groups. Two organizations offered a more radical vision. The **Industrial Workers of the World**, formed in 1905, clamored for "one big union" to oust "the ruling class" and abolish the wage system.

The **Socialist Party**, founded in 1901, had, by 1912, grown to 118,000 members. By that year, it had elected 1,200 public officials, including the mayors of Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Flint, Michigan.; and Schenectady, New York. More than 300 Socialist periodicals appeared. A weekly socialist newspaper, the *Appeal to Reason*, reached a circulation of over 700,000 copies in 1913.

Socialist support was concentrated between two immigrant groups: Germans, who had left Europe in the 1840s, and East European Jews, who were refugees from Czarist repression. The largest daily socialist newspaper in the United States, the *Jewish Daily Forward*, which had a circulation of 142,000 in 1913, was published in Yiddish, not in English.

The Socialist Party's first major electoral victories occurred in Milwaukee, which had a large German community. In 1910, the city elected a Socialist mayor and member of Congress. The Socialist Party declined in influence during Democratic President Woodrow Wilson's first term, as many reforms enacted by Congress diminished the party's appeal. Support for the party briefly surged during World War I, but had dissipated by 1919 as a result of federal, state, and local campaigns to suppress the party and internal disputes involving how the party should respond to the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia.