

# The Struggles of Workers and Unions

# Problems Faced By Industrial Workers

- **Poor Working Conditions:** Working was often extremely hazardous. There were few safeguards around machinery. Thousands of workers were injured or killed in accidents each year.
- **Low Wages:** Employers hired the cheapest possible laborers. Women and children were especially low paid. Child laborers missed sunshine, fresh air, play and the chance to better their lives through schooling.
- **Long Hours:** Working hours were very long. Employees faced a six day week with between 10 and 14 hours of work a day.
- **Lack of Security:** The worker could be fired at any time for any reason. There was no unemployment insurance, health insurance, old age pensions, paid holidays or paid sick days.

# Birth of Labor Unions

Industrial workers in the late 1800s had no power to make big business raise their pay or improve their working conditions. Since most work required little skill, workers could easily be replaced.

Eventually, workers realized that by organizing into **labor unions**(a group of workers organized to achieve common goals) they would have more power. If an employer refused a union's demands for better working conditions and higher pay, union members could strike(walk off the job). In addition, unions could use their voting power and resources to persuade the government to pass laws favoring workers.

# The Knights of Labor

By the end of the 1800s, many workers believed that the only way to overcome their problems was to join together in a national union of all workers.

- The knights of labor was organized in 1869. Its founders hoped to form one large union that would include both skilled and unskilled workers.
- The Knights demanded an 8 hour work day, higher wages and safety codes for factories.
- They also proposed laws limiting immigration, since they saw immigrants as competitors for their jobs.
- After losing several strikes, the Knights of Labor fell apart. One reason for their failure was that many skilled workers refused to be grouped in the same union as unskilled workers.

# The American Federation of Labor

The A.F.L. was founded in 1881 by **Samuel Gompers**. He hoped to organize a powerful union by uniting workers with the same economic interests.

The AFL brought together several small unions of skilled workers(such as carpenters, cigar makers, shoemakers) into a single national union.

The goals of the AFL included higher pay, an 8 hour work day and better working conditions.

The AFL used strikes as one of its main tactics. Striking workers were paid from a special fund established by the union, making their strikes an effective weapon.

The AFL also fought for the closed shop(workplaces that hire only union members).

The AFL emerged as the major voice of organized labor. However, in its early years, the union excluded unskilled workers.

# Methods Used By Management Against Labor

- Strike-breakers: temporary workers (“scabs”) used during a strike;
- Blacklisting: Fired union members’ names sent to other employers so the fired members can’t get a job
- Injunctions: court orders prohibiting strikes
- Yellow Dog Contract: employer forces workers to sign agreements not to join a union
- Company Union: management forms its own labor union, which it controls;

# Workers Demand That the Government Listen

One problem that early unions faced was that government leaders in those years favored businesses over unions. There were several reasons for this:

- **Influence of Big Business in Government.** Big business gave large money contributions to government leaders and gained influence over them. Also, many in government believed that the U.S. owed its greatness to business people.
- **Fear of Strikes.** Between 1880 and 1890, there were more than 20,000 strikes involving over 6 million workers. The government was afraid these strikes would hurt the growth of the American economy.

# Why government favored business cont.

- **Unfavorable Public Opinion.** Most people believed that if unions succeeded in winning higher wages, prices would rise. Furthermore, business exploited the violence that often accompanied strikes to paint the strikers as dangerous radicals.



# Government Starts to Change its Attitude Towards Unions

## **Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire in New York**

- 1911, fire killed 146 workers, mostly women, at the Triangle Shirtwaist factory;
- Investigation showed that the workers could not escape because the doors were locked from the inside, and there was only one fire escape.
- Because of this tragedy, the public began to demand that the government take action. In 1913, the government created the Department of Labor to study the problems of workers and propose solutions.