

DEFINING MOMENTS WORKERS UNITE! THE AMERICAN LABOR MOVEMENT



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Chapter Three

RADICALS, PROGRESSIVES, AND THE WORKING MAN



Where trade unions are most firmly organized, there are the rights of the people most respected.

—Samuel Gompers

During America's Progressive Era—a two-decade period stretching roughly from the end of the nineteenth century through the United States' entrance into World War I in 1917—organized workers secured some improvements in wages and working conditions. Most of these gains stemmed from organized labor activity, while others arose from progressive social reformers who wanted to reduce the power of corporations and end child labor and other controversial employment practices. Still, the path to greater prosperity for American workers remained a bumpy one, filled with nearly as many defeats as victories.

The American Worker at the Turn of the Century

As the United States entered the 1900s, it remained heavily dependent on manual workers for its industrial and agricultural wealth. More than half of the nation's men and women—and a good number of its children—toiled with their hands to bring in wages. The occupations in which they worked varied enormously. Some worked as builders of bridges, subways, and railroad terminals in America's great cities. Some spent their days cleaning households, stocking shop shelves, harvesting crops from fields and orchards, and tending cattle and sheep. Still others worked in paper mills, slaughterhouses, foundries, and other types of factories.



By the early years of the twentieth century, immigrant workers were pouring into American cities in greater numbers than ever before. Their labor helped lift the United States to new heights of industrial productivity.

But wherever they worked and whatever their occupation, the majority of these laborers worked very long hours and earned very little money. One exception to this rule was the craft tradesman, who was usually enrolled in one of the American Federation of Labor's member trade unions. Blessed with

a highly valued set of skills, these AFL men were able to carve out somewhat more comfortable places for themselves in industrial America. But even they had little margin for economic error, for any extended bout of illness, injury, or unemployment was likely to send them into poverty. All told, unskilled and skilled wage workers in American industry earned less than half as much as “white collar” or clerical employees. And some of the most dangerous and exhausting industries to work in, such as mining, paid very low wages. Families that depended on income from these jobs frequently struggled to obtain even the necessities of life, like decent shelter, clothing, and food.

Immigrants constituted an ever-growing percentage of these unskilled or semiskilled laborers. By 1900 more than a third of the U.S. population—about 26 million people—were either immigrants themselves or native-born Americans with at least one foreign-born parent. This immigrant surge showed no signs of abating, either. In 1905 alone, more than a million people emigrated from foreign shores to America to start new lives for themselves. Some of these immigrants joined native-born Americans in labor unions, but many of these organizations enjoyed only a few short years of existence before expiring. In 1901 only 1.125 million Americans were unionized—less than 10 percent of the nation’s work force. And the country’s largest labor union—the American Federation of Labor (AFL)—was not welcoming of new arrivals from eastern Europe, China, Mexico, and other foreign nations.

The continued limited growth of organized labor, even in the face of grinding poverty and hazardous working conditions, stemmed from several factors. For example, tensions between different ethnic groups and between skilled and unskilled workers often kept workers from presenting a united front in negotiations with management. In addition, courts and lawmakers at the state and federal levels remained much more sympathetic to big business than to struggling workers. But most of all, union growth was stifled by profit-hungry corporations that were utterly determined to keep workers from effectively organizing. They did this not only with a variety of union busting and strikebreaking strategies, but also with regular volleys of propaganda that painted all unionists as anti-American radicals.

Bitter Defeat and Stunning Victory

Some of the most famous battles between labor and management early in the Progressive Era took place in the mining camps of Colorado and northern

Idaho. These particular conflicts were rooted in wider changes taking place across the American West. During the last few decades of the nineteenth century, corporate giants like Anaconda, Kennecott, and Colorado Fuel and Iron had acquired control over vast western fields of copper, coal, and other minerals vital to America's industrial expansion. These companies filled their payrolls with unskilled immigrant workers, most of whom had little choice but to raise their families in "company towns"—clusters of rental homes, schools, shops, and churches all established, owned, and managed by the mine operators.

"It is well known that we have markedly differed and still differ from the policy of the officers of the Western Federation of Miners," declared AFL President Samuel Gompers. "Their conception and ours of the work and tactics of labor are as far apart as the poles."

In the 1890s union organizers successfully tapped into widespread mine worker anger and discontent and formed the Western Federation of Miners (WFM). Over the next several years, the WFM clashed repeatedly—and violently—with mine owners in Colorado and Idaho's Coeur d'Alene territory. These conflicts bore many of the hallmarks of all-out war. On several occasions, governors in league with mine owners sent militia troops to round up and imprison hundreds of striking workers. During one of these crackdowns the entire male population of a union town was arrested. WFM members retaliated with escalating violence against companies and strikebreakers, including an 1899 dynamite attack that obliterated operations at a Colorado Fuel and Iron mine in the Coeur d'Alenes.

The war between the increasingly radical WFM and western mine operators culminated in 1903-04 in Cripple Creek, Colorado. This conflict was sparked by several factors. One issue was worker anger over the refusal of the state's anti-union Republicans, including Governor James H. Peabody, to implement a voter-approved referendum imposing an eight-hour workday in mining and other hazardous industries. Tension also arose over mine owners' refusal to recognize the unionization rights of mine and smelter employees. The WFM leadership subsequently called a strike that dragged on for months. During this time, both sides used violence and intimidation to try and advance their cause. The crisis reached new heights in June 1904, when a union sympathizer set off a dynamite explosion that destroyed a train station and killed thirteen strikebreakers. In response, Colorado militia troops, the Cripple Creek Mine Owners Association, and an anti-union vigilante group known as the Citizens Alliance worked together to round up more than 200

union leaders and strikers and force them out of Colorado at gunpoint. This expulsion broke the back of the strike action. The WFM never recovered, and most of the Cripple Creek miners and smelters could only watch helplessly as their jobs were handed over to unorganized immigrant workers.¹

Following the example of their hard rock mining colleagues, western coal mining companies were able to take similar steps to neutralize union “agitators” in their own industry in 1904. Employing a mix of state troops and company-sponsored vigilante groups, western coal operators masterminded a series of mass arrests and expulsions that smashed union-led strikes across Colorado.

Roosevelt Sides with the United Mine Workers

In the final analysis, though, these victories of the big western mining operators were not nearly as momentous as a labor triumph over management that occurred at virtually the same time in Pennsylvania. This struggle pitted 150,000 members of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), which was led by John Mitchell, in a strike action against anthracite coal field owners in Pennsylvania, home of the nation’s richest anthracite fields.

The mine workers launched their May 1902 strike not only to secure better wages and working conditions, but also to force management to recognize the UMWA as the workers’ legitimate representative in negotiations (see “The Importance of Collective Bargaining,” p. 52). Union leaders and rank-and-file members alike knew that these ambitious goals would be bitterly contested by Pennsylvania’s coal companies, most of which were actually owned by powerful railroad interests. “This will be the fiercest struggle in which we have yet engaged,” declared Mitchell. “It will be a fight to the end, and our organization will either achieve a great triumph or it will be completely annihilated.”²

The strike dragged on inconclusively through the summer of 1902, to the growing frustration of U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt. The “coal kings” refused to even meet with Mitchell or other union leaders, and so mining of anthracite coal—the chief fuel for heating homes in America—slowed to a trickle in Pennsylvania. Roosevelt and other political leaders began to express fears about a wintertime “coal famine.” In early October Roosevelt decided to step in by organizing a White House meeting between coal executives and the UMWA.



In 1902 President Theodore Roosevelt (center) adopted a sympathetic stance toward striking coal mine workers. Roosevelt's attitude signaled a dramatic shift in the federal government's usual position on labor-management issues.

Once the meeting got underway, though, the mine operators made a serious tactical mistake. Not only did they treat the union representatives with contempt, they also acted as if Roosevelt had no choice but to support their corporate interests in the dispute. They dismissed Roosevelt's appeals for both sides to make patriotic sacrifices for the "greater good" of the American people. Instead, they demanded that Roosevelt use federal troops to force the strikers back to work. By the time the meeting ended, the president had become very angry about the "insolence" shown by mining executives like George F. Baer, president of the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad and chief spokesman for the mine owners. "If it wasn't for the high office I hold, I would have taken [Baer] by the seat of the breeches and the nape of the neck and chucked him out of that window," Roosevelt later wrote.³

Shortly after this White House meeting, Roosevelt informed the mine owners that he was thinking about using federal troops to operate the mines

until the owners agreed to settle the strike through binding arbitration—a process in which labor-management disputes are resolved by an impartial government “arbitrator.” This veiled threat finally pierced the fog of confident self-righteousness in which the mine owners had cloaked themselves. Stunned by the realization that Roosevelt could not be counted on to support them—and by growing public criticism of their stance—the coal executives grudgingly agreed to submit to arbitration from a government commission. This concession convinced the strikers to return to the coal mines on October 23, thus averting a disastrous winter of coal shortages. Five months later, the arbitration commission completed its work. It did not give the UMWA the formal recognition it desired. But it did grant a 10 percent pay raise, a shorter workday, and several other work improvements demanded by the union.

Today, the Anthracite Coal Strike is regarded as a momentous historical event for several reasons. First, it helped establish Roosevelt, who had been in office for less than a year when the strike began, as a bold progressive reformer unafraid to take on powerful corporate interests. In addition, the Roosevelt administration’s actions during the strike “marked the turn of the U.S. Government from strikebreaker to peacemaker in industrial disputes,” in the words of one labor historian.⁴ But perhaps most importantly, the partial victory claimed by the UMWA gave an enormous boost of confidence to organized labor throughout America. Most than twenty years after it occurred, labor leader Samuel Gompers described the 1902 strike as the “most important single incident in the labor movement of the United States.... From then on the miners became not merely human machines to produce coal but men and citizens.”⁵

Rise of the Wobblies

The full historical impact of the 1902 Anthracite Coal Strike did not reveal itself for years, however. Labor activists and union members were happy with the victory, but they knew that other triumphs had been short-lived. This sense of ongoing struggle, combined with setbacks like the 1904 Colorado mining strikes, led to the founding in June 1905 of a radical labor organization known as the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).

The IWW was established during a secret meeting in Chicago attended by WFM refugees and a number of America’s most prominent Socialists, anarchists, and radical union activists. Famous labor organizers including Mary Harris “Mother” Jones, William “Big Bill” Haywood, Eugene V. Debs, Daniel



Socialist Eugene Debs was a pivotal figure in the founding and early development of the International Workers of the World (IWW).

De Leon, and William E. Trautmann participated in the gathering, which was designed to create a “general industrial union embracing all industries.”

The IWW founders offered a blunt perspective on American society. The organization’s founding statement, in fact, flatly declared that “the working class and the employing class have nothing in common. There can be no peace so long as hunger and want are found among millions of working people and the few, who make up the employing class, have all the good things in life.” According to the IWW, the solution to America’s problems of social injustice was to bring *all* workers together in opposition to the ruling class of employers. And, they added, if the ruling class continued using violence and intimidation to keep workers down, the IWW was perfectly willing to respond with violence of its own.

This position placed the Industrial Workers of the World in direct opposition to the AFL. Under the direction of Samuel Gompers, the AFL and its membership of skilled tradesmen had navigated decades of turbulence that had dashed numerous other union groups to bits. But IWW members, known to both friend and foe as “Wobblies,” viewed the AFL trade union as an elitist organization that did not care about industrial and agricultural workers who did not possess commercially valuable trade skills. They charged that the AFL’s membership policies, which kept women, minorities, recent immigrants, and unskilled workers out of the organization, constituted an unforgivable betrayal of basic principles of worker solidarity. As the IWW complained, “the trade unions foster a state of affairs which allows one set of workers to be pitted against another set of workers in the same industry, thereby helping defeat one another in wage wars.”⁶

Gompers and the rest of the AFL leadership brushed aside these complaints. They insisted that if they opened membership to wider groups of workers, the union's existing membership of tradesmen would get drawn into damaging labor disputes that did not directly concern them. This belief was so deeply felt within the AFL that when member unions like the United Metal Workers Industrial Union and the United Brewery Workers tried to form more general industrial unions in 1905 and 1907, respectively, Gompers and the rest of the leadership expelled them from the AFL.⁷

AFL leaders also framed their negative views of women, African Americans, and eastern European immigrants as a sensible stance. They observed that these groups had the potential to take jobs held by AFL members, or to flood labor markets with cheap workers who would undercut wages earned by AFL members. Still, the organization's long-standing hostility to African Americans and eastern European immigrants was based on bigotry as well as fears about competition for jobs. Similarly, the AFL's continued opposition to women in the workplace reflected fears about their possible negative impact on wages and job competition. But it also displayed deep-seated anxieties about the social impact if women strayed from their traditional roles. "The demand for female labor [is] an insidious assault upon the home," explained one conservative labor leader. "It is the knife of the assassin, aimed at the family circle."⁸

The founders of the IWW promised to build an organization that would serve as a sort of anti-AFL. They vowed to accept all workers—male and female, skilled and unskilled, native-born and immigrant, white and black—and meld them into a single great weapon that would crush "the corporations" and transform American society once and for all. Not surprisingly, this vow alarmed the executives who led the nation's great industries and the politicians who were responsible for maintaining social order. But it also sparked doubt and fear in the hearts of millions of Americans who favored addressing the nation's problems through reforms—not revolution.

Labor Gains in an Era of Progressive Reform

The need for a radical organization like the IWW was hotly debated by American workers and progressive reformers. Many people felt that the opening years of the twentieth century were already bringing important changes to American business and society. During this time, for example, President Roosevelt and like-minded progressive reformers implemented a wide range of

The Importance of Collective Bargaining

Labor organizers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries viewed management recognition of unions as essential to improving the fortunes of workers. They felt this way because once recognition was granted, workers could then engage in “collective bargaining”—a type of negotiation in which authorized union representatives bargain with management over wages, hours, and work rules applicable to all union members. In 1914 famed UMWA leader John Mitchell explained the importance of collective bargaining in testimony before Congress:

There can be no permanent prosperity to the workingmen, there can be no permanent industrial peace, until the principle is firmly and fully established that in industrial life the settlements of wages, hours of labor, and all the important conditions of work, are made between the employers and the workingmen collectively and not between employers and workingmen individually. The individual workman theoretically bargains with his employer as to the wages to be paid by his employer; but practically there is no bargaining. The individual workman must accept the wages and conditions of employment that are offered to him by his employer. It is a matter of no concern at all to an employer if one workingman refuses employment. He thinks nothing about it, because there is another workingman ready to take the job. This “system of individual bargaining” gives too great an advantage to management, but collective bargaining evens the playing field.

Source:

Quoted in *Major Problems in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*. Edited by Leon Fink. Washington, DC: Heath, 1993, p.40.

policies at the federal and state levels to address problems of excessive corporate power, urban poverty, social justice, and environmental destruction.

Many of these policies improved the lives of the American worker. For example, legislators passed numerous laws regulating the working conditions of women, boosting safety standards in dangerous workplaces, and limiting

the employment of children. In addition, many states—35 by 1915—established modest systems of workmen’s compensation for injured workers. State legislatures also passed housing reforms to clean up the worst tenement slums in their cities. This atmosphere of reform even led some private corporations to voluntarily introduce job-safety and retirement programs for workers.

These progressive gains lifted the fortunes of many working families, and they were embraced by a wide assortment of liberal labor activists and social reformers. Yet the largest union of all, the American Federation of Labor, voiced mixed feelings about these governmental attempts to combat poverty, disease, crime, and other problems in industrial America. AFL leaders acknowledged these problems, but they worried that the reforms might reduce their members’ loyalty to the federation. The Progressive Era also highlighted Gompers’s longstanding belief in limited government. He wanted the government to guarantee basic worker rights, like the right to bargain collectively, but he did not believe that additional governmental “interference” in society’s affairs was warranted. “We do not want to place more power in the hands of the government to investigate and regulate the lives, the conduct and the freedom of America’s workers,” he said in 1915. “Where there is unwillingness to accept responsibility for one’s life and for making the most of it, there is a loss of strong, red-blooded, rugged independence and will power.”⁹

Most newspapers and legislators did not share this concern. Instead, they treated the wave of progressive reforms as evidence that the United States was poised on the cusp of a grand new era of widespread prosperity. In addition, the reform spirit running through America gave advocates of pro-labor socialism an opening to move into positions of actual political influence. The Socialist labor leader Eugene Debs made the first of five consecutive runs for the presidency in 1900, and while none of these efforts came close to lifting him to the White House, millions of working-class Americans came to see him as a wise and inspiring figure. At the local level, meanwhile, Socialist administrations were actually voted into office in cities like Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Flint, Michigan, during the early 1900s. Unions themselves experienced rapid growth as well. Led by the AFL, the nation’s total union membership jumped from fewer than 900,000 workers in 1900 to more than 2 million by 1904.

In reviewing these changes to American society, mainstream labor organizations like the AFL argued that Wobblies actually hindered the cause of workers by taking radical positions that reduced public support for labor.



AFL President Samuel Gompers (right) consciously worked to keep his labor organization from being identified with the more radical Wobblies.

They pointed, for example, to highly publicized events like the 1907 murder trial of “Big Bill” Haywood. A longtime radical unionist, WFM president, and co-founder of the IWW, Haywood was charged with arranging the 1905 assassination of former Idaho governor Frank Steunenberg, who had played a major role earlier in the decade in smashing the Western Federation of Miners. Haywood was eventually acquitted, thanks in no small part to the efforts of famed defense attorney Clarence Darrow (see “Clarence Darrow Defends Unions in the ‘Trial of the Century,’” p. 170). But the trade unionists of the AFL openly worried that labor-related violence and mayhem made the American public wary of *all* union efforts. “It is well known that we have markedly differed and still differ

from the policy of the officers of the Western Federation of Miners,” declared Gompers in an attempt to keep the AFL from being tainted by the Steunenberg killing. “Their conception and ours of the work and tactics of labor are as far apart as the poles.”¹⁰

Wobblies and other confrontation-minded unionists responded by stating that the AFL’s membership did not understand or care about the horrible conditions that still prevailed in many industries. They also pointed out that whatever the other gains achieved during the Progressive Era, worker wages still paled when compared to the fabulous riches being raked in on a daily basis by America’s “ruling class.” They argued that these inequities proved that even more radical actions were needed to get workers what they deserved.

Big Business Strikes Back

Debate within the labor movement over whether workers should continue working within America’s existing political and economic systems to

improve their lives (the AFL position)—or simply battle to completely remake those systems (the position of IWW and its Socialist and anarchist allies)—dragged on inconclusively. In the meantime, big business interests launched a sustained counterattack against organized labor.

Corporations worked to block any further labor gains through several different strategies. One strategy used by anti-union employers was to mount anti-labor public relations and lobbying campaigns through corporate organizations like the Citizens' Industrial Association (founded in 1903) and the National Association of Manufacturers (founded in 1895). These associations fought for industry priorities like the “open shop,” a workplace that could employ both union and non-union employees. Another industry goal was to advance the use of “yellow dog” employment contracts, which obligated signers to stay out of unions as a condition of employment.

These anti-union drives, which were particularly strong in the mass production industries, also relied heavily on the U.S. court system. Many American courts of the early twentieth century were strongly pro-industry and anti-union in their orientation. This stance was due partly to the fact that judges themselves came primarily from privileged upper-class backgrounds rather than working-class beginnings. But the courts were also by their very nature defenders of societal stability. As a result, they were often skeptical of organized labor campaigns to change the ways in which American business and society had long operated.

As a result, worker gains during the Progressive Era were limited by unfavorable court rulings. In some instances, advances made by organized labor were even rolled back by judges who sided with industry in important



United Mine Workers President John Mitchell and other labor leaders repeatedly described U.S. courts as anti-labor puppets of big business.

Children Caught in the Crossfire

Public relations blunders by management have been cited by historians as one of the main reasons that the 1912 Lawrence Strike in Massachusetts ended in victory for the striking textile workers. When the strike began in



Children of Lawrence strikers in New York City.

court cases. In 1904, for example, judges in Illinois and Wisconsin ruled that employers had every right to maintain open shops. Four years later, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned a federal ban on yellow dog contracts in the railroad business. Worst of all from the perspective of labor unions, dozens of judges issued injunctions—court orders—against actions that organized workers used to win battles with management.

January, the textile owners engaged in several strikebreaking tactics that actually increased public support for the workers, such as harassment of the young female picketers. But the owners' most disastrous move was to direct state police to stop strikers from sending their children away to sympathetic families in other cities, where they would be fed and cared for until the strike ended.

On February 24, 1912, dozens of families gathered at the Lawrence train station to send a group of children to waiting caregivers in Philadelphia. Before the children could board the train, however, police launched a vicious assault on the families. "When the time came [for the children] to depart," recalled one victim, "the police ... closed in on us with their clubs, beating right and left with no thought of the children who then were in desperate danger of being trampled to death. The mothers and the children were thus hurled in a mass and bodily dragged to a military truck and even then clubbed, irrespective of the cries of the panic-stricken mothers and children. We can scarcely find words with which to describe this display of brutality."

The police arrested a total of thirty-five women and children that day. The immediate public outcry over the incident soon prompted the authorities to release them, but by then it was too late. News of the attack on unarmed women and children turned public opinion decisively against the mill owners. Condemned by newspapers across the country as unfeeling monsters, the textile owners watched with mounting alarm as Congress also launched an investigation of the industry's strikebreaking activities. Bombarded by this negative publicity, the owners reluctantly decided to meet the strikers' demands, and by the end of March the triumphant textile workers were working again.

Injunctions were rarely issued against specific strike actions. But they were often used to keep unions from organizing large-scale boycotts or "general" strikes—work stoppages involving multiple industries in a single community or region. And sometimes they were even used to keep workers from picketing, meeting, or even shouting "scab" at strikebreakers.¹¹ "No weapon has been used with such disastrous effect against trade unions as the injunc-

tion in labor disputes,” charged UMW President John Mitchell. “It is difficult to speak in measured tone or moderate language of the savagery and venom with which unions have been assailed by the injunction.”¹²

The union cause also continued to suffer from self-inflicted wounds. In addition to its well-publicized internal squabbles, the movement’s reputation with the wider general public suffered whenever labor disputes flared up in violence. To be sure, some of these explosions of bloodshed were triggered by industry thugs or strikebreaking militia troops. But the more aggressive unionists, some of whom remained closely allied with anarchists and other revolutionaries, were not blameless. Union members sometimes beat up strikebreakers or harassed men who did not want to join their organizations. And labor radicals occasionally engaged in outright acts of terrorism, such as the 1911 bombing of the offices of the *Los Angeles Times* by AFL member James B. McNamara, which claimed 21 lives.

From Lawrence to Ludlow

Yet despite all of these massive problems and obstacles, workers in the early twentieth century continued to make strides in organizing unions and improving their economic fortunes. These gains never would have been possible without the grit and determination displayed by millions of workers. But the movement was also energized by historical events that dramatically increased public support for labor rights and curbs on corporate power.

One of these events was the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, in which 146 employees (mostly young women) died when a fire raged through a New York City sweatshop factory. This tragedy, which was caused by management’s practice of locking stairwells and exits to keep workers from leaving the shop floor on breaks, sparked public outrage not only in New York but across the nation. It also prompted a wave of new workplace safety regulations, generated momentum for government investigations of industrial conditions, and helped a major new union, the International Ladies’ Garment Workers Union, get established.

Another milestone in the labor movement was a successful strike waged by mostly female textile workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts. The ten-week “Bread and Roses” strike, which was organized and led in large measure by Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Bill Haywood, and other IWW leaders, ended in a decisive victory for labor (see “Children Caught in the Crossfire of a Labor



A distraught man stands in the remains of the Ludlow tent colony that was destroyed by fire during the 1914 Ludlow Massacre.

Dispute,” p. 56). Wages for textile workers were boosted all across New England under the terms of settlement. In addition, the Lawrence strike gave women new levels of acceptance in the wider labor movement.

In 1914 the United States was rocked by another dark event in its troubled labor history, this time in Ludlow, Colorado. And like the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire of three years earlier, the impact of this horrible event was felt for many years afterward. The violence that erupted in Ludlow on April 20, 1914, had been brewing for a long time. Coal miners in the employ of major operators in the region endured long hours of exhausting work for little pay, and most of their meager earnings went right back to the operators via their company stores. In September 1913 the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) organized a strike of Colorado coal miners that focused on Colorado

Fuel and Iron (CFI). This company was the largest and most powerful coal company in the West, and it had a reputation for being ruthlessly anti-union. It was owned by the fabulously wealthy industrialist John D. Rockefeller, who by some estimations ranks as the richest individual in American history.¹³

The principal demands of the miners were for UMWA recognition, a 10 percent increase in wages, an eight-hour workday, and the right to choose their own housing, stores, and physicians. The CFI executives rejected all these demands and evicted the families of the striking miners from their rental housing. The families relocated in a series of tent cities put together by the union. The largest of these tent colonies, containing about 1,200 people, was set up outside of the town of Ludlow. As the strike dragged on, these tents provided little shelter against the fierce Colorado winter. The misery of the miners' families was further deepened by continued harassment from guards and thugs hired by CFI. But the Ludlow colony persevered until April 20, 1914, when Colorado National Guardsmen launched an unprovoked and fearsome attack on the colony. Using machine guns and kerosene, the guardsmen destroyed the tent city. In the process, they killed six miners, two women, and eleven children. Most of the children suffocated to death when they tried to take refuge from the attack in a pit beneath one of the tents that was set afire.

News of the Ludlow Massacre sparked outrage throughout Colorado's coal country. Striking miners at other locations attacked mine after mine, setting fire to buildings and shooting guards. Much of Colorado became a virtual war zone between gun-wielding strikers and company guards and state troopers. These clashes were finally put to rest when President Woodrow Wilson sent in a large contingent of federal troops to disarm the strikers and replace the state militia and corporate guards. The strike itself dragged on for several more months, but on December 10, 1914, the UMWA ran out of funds to support the striking miners. The union thus called off the strike, even though it had been unable to secure any of its demands. Some of the strikers were able to go back to their old jobs, but many were replaced.

The labor defeat in the so-called Colorado Coal Wars of 1913-1914 was difficult for unionists to take. To many workers, the shedding of innocent blood at Ludlow proved once again that wealthy owners like Rockefeller valued dollars more than human life and dignity. Over the long term, though, government investigations of the events in Colorado sparked new demands for meaningful reforms in mining and other industries (see "Investigating the

Ludlow Massacre,” p. 173). In addition, the Ludlow Massacre became a powerful rallying cry for new generations of labor activists.

Notes

- ¹ Jameson, Elizabeth. *All That Glitters: Class, Conflict, and Community in Cripple Creek*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998.
- ² Quoted in Cornell, Robert J. *The Anthracite Coal Strike of 1902*. New York: Catholic University Press of America, 1957, p. 91.
- ³ Quoted in Reynolds, Robert L., “The Coal Kings Come to Judgment,” *American Heritage* [online], April 1960, volume 11, issue 3. Available online at <http://www.americanheritage.com>.
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- ¹¹ McGerr, p. 144.
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William “Big Bill” Haywood (1869-1928)
Leader of the Western Federation of Miners (WFM) and co-founder of the International Workers of the World (IWW)

William Dudley “Big Bill” Haywood Jr. was born on February 4, 1869, in Salt Lake City, Utah. His father, William Sr., had reportedly worked as a Pony Express rider before turning to silver mining. He died of pneumonia when young Bill was three years old, leaving his wife Henrietta with two small children. She married another miner named William Carruthers four years later. At age nine Haywood accidentally punctured his right eye with a knife while whittling the stock of a slingshot. The injury blinded him for life in that eye, but Haywood effectively used the eye’s shocking appearance—it filmed over in a milky glaze—as a tool of intimidation when he reached adulthood.

Haywood also began working in the Utah silver mines when he was nine years old. Laboring in the mines involved long hours of dangerous and exhausting work for little money, but there were few other employment options in the region. Haywood spent most of the next several years toiling in western mines, though he also spent time as a surveyor, homesteader, and cowhand in the late 1880s.

A Radical Voice for Miners

All of these efforts to escape mining failed, either because of punishing economic downturns or governmental policies. In the early 1890s, for example, the federal government seized Haywood’s 160-acre homestead and added it to an Indian reservation without providing him with a cent of compensation. Haywood drifted back to the silver mines, but by this time labor uprisings such as the 1886 Haymarket Square riots and the 1894 Pullman Strike had also caught his attention. These explosive confrontations both angered and inspired Hay-

wood. By the mid-1890s he had developed a deep conviction that the men who owned and directed America’s railroads, mines, and other industries were perfectly willing to sacrifice the bodies and spirits of workers for profits. He also came to believe that radical—even violent—protest was the surest path to economic and social justice for long-suffering American workers.

In 1896 Haywood formally joined the labor movement as a member of the Western Federation of Miners (WFM). Haywood’s enthusiasm for the union cause and his personal charisma enabled him to climb up the union ranks, and by 1900 he was one of the WFM’s top officials. In 1902 Haywood became secretary-treasurer, which placed him behind only President Charles Moyer in the WFM. Haywood’s volatile personality, unyielding Socialist beliefs, and taste for confrontational tactics clashed with the more cautious and moderate Moyer, and the two soon became bitter rivals.

Haywood emerged as one of the most controversial labor leaders in America over the next few years. The event that first vaulted him into the public eye was the so-called Colorado Labor Wars, a deadly clash that pitted miners against mine operators and Colorado state authorities. This battle, which raged across the state for much of 1903 and 1904, was initially triggered by the refusal of Colorado legislators, who did the bidding of the mine owners, to approve eight-hour-workday legislation. But the conflict worsened when mine operators and state militias resorted to savage displays of violence to crush the WFM and other mining unions. The miners reciprocated with bloody forays of their own, including dynamite attacks on replacement workers and numerous acts of sabotage. Throughout these long months of tension and violence, Haywood urged his fellow miners to stand firm—and to use any means necessary to force management to meet their demands. “He had tremendous magnetism [when he appeared before union audiences],” recalled one labor reporter. “Huge frame, one blazing eye, voice filling the hall. When he shouted, ‘Eight hours of work, eight hours of play, eight hours of sleep—*eight dollars a day!*’ that last line came like a clap of thunder.”¹

Under Haywood’s leadership, the WFM experienced a surge in membership (to reach 30-40,000 by 1903) and expanded beyond its Colorado base into several other states, including Idaho, Arizona, and Nevada. The union even began exploring the idea of pushing into the upper Midwest, where mining was growing by leaps and bounds. The expanding influence of the Haywood and his violent rhetoric alarmed the mining industry. But the

union's strike actions were ultimately defeated by the mine owners, who used National Guard troops to arrest union organizers and protect strikebreakers. The WFM's position was also greatly weakened by the American Federation of Labor (AFL), whose trade union membership declined to carry out boycotts or sympathy strikes that might have helped the miners.

Haywood and the Wobblies

The WFM survived its defeat in the Colorado Labor Wars, albeit as a much smaller union (it was eventually absorbed into the United Steelworkers). But the whole affair infuriated Haywood. Convinced that the AFL "aristocrats" cared only for themselves and that America's capitalist system was hopelessly corrupt, he concluded that industrial workers could only remake that system by joining forces in a single great union. With that in mind, Haywood and other WFM officials met in Chicago in June 1905 with labor leaders including Daniel De Leon, Eugene V. Debs, and Mary Harris "Mother" Jones. Led by Haywood, the group formed a radical new organization called the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). "We are here to confederate the workers of this country into a working-class movement that shall have for its purpose the emancipation of the working-class from the slave bondage of capitalism," Haywood declared in a speech at the outset of the convention. "The aims and objects of this organization shall be to put the working-class in possession of the economic power, the means of life, in control of the machinery of production and distribution, without regard to capitalist masters."²

Over the next several years, IWW members—known as Wobblies—established a reputation for themselves as the most militant wing of the entire labor movement. The IWW preached a message of revolution to working-class Americans, and they engineered a series of violent strikes and work stoppages that rocked various mining, logging, and manufacturing outfits.

During the earliest years of the IWW, however, Haywood was mostly relegated to the sidelines. In 1906 he was arrested and charged with ordering the murder of Frank Steunenberg, a former governor of Idaho who had been killed by a dynamite explosion outside his home in late 1905. Steunenberg had been a bitter foe of the WFM and Haywood, and when investigators arrested a former WFM member named Harry Orchard for the murder, Orchard claimed that the assassination had been ordered by Haywood.

Haywood’s trial attracted national attention, in part because the famous lawyer Clarence Darrow agreed to defend the IWW leader. As Haywood awaited trial, he corresponded from jail with a variety of WFM, IWW, and Socialist leaders. The Socialists even arranged to get him on the 1906 Colorado ballot as their candidate for governor, and he received 16,000 votes—four times the number that the Socialist nominee had received in the previous election. Once the trial got underway, it was revealed that Orchard had secretly worked for both mine owners and private detective agencies that carried out anti-union activities. Since the prosecution’s case against Haywood was based largely on Orchard’s testimony, the news that he had been a “double agent” in labor-management clashes severely undermined his credibility. Haywood was acquitted of all charges in July 1906.

After regaining his freedom, Haywood returned to both the WFM and the IWW. Both organizations had become wracked by personality clashes and squabbles over political tactics by this time, and in 1907 the WFM formally withdrew from the IWW. One year later, Moyer managed to push Haywood out of the WFM altogether. Haywood decided to devote all his energies to the Wobblies. Over the next several years he orchestrated a number of successful strikes across the country, including the 1912 “Bread and Roses” textile strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts. In 1915 Haywood was formally appointed the head of the IWW. He remained a fixture in the nation’s headlines throughout this period. His continued prominence stemmed mostly from his radical political views, but his fierce attacks on Christianity and the Bible—Haywood was a lifelong atheist—also made him a target of religious leaders around the country.

In 1917 the United States entered World War I, and within a matter of months Congress had passed legislation that made it illegal for American citizens to interfere with military recruitment or otherwise “sabotage” the war effort. These new laws blatantly ignored First Amendment guarantees of first speech, but the Woodrow Wilson administration used them to crack down on the IWW and other leftist groups that opposed American involvement in the war. In 1918 Haywood and dozens of other war critics were arrested. Haywood was convicted and sentenced to twenty years in prison for his “seditious” activities. He served a year in the federal prison in Leavenworth, Kansas, before gaining a temporary release on bail while his appeal was being heard. When the courts upheld his conviction in 1921, Haywood fled to Russia, where he was welcomed by that nation’s Communist leadership.

Haywood spent the remaining years of his life in exile. He settled in Moscow, where health problems from diabetes and years of alcoholism severely curtailed his activities. Haywood died in Moscow on May 18, 1928.

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² Foner, Philip S. *The Industrial Workers of the World, 1905-1917*. Volume Four of *History of the Labor Movement in the United States*. New York: International Publishers, 1965, p. 29.

Remembering the Flint Sit-Down Strike, 1937

The 1936-37 Flint Sit-Down Strike was one of the great victories in the history of the American labor movement. When members of the United Automobile Workers (UAW) occupied one of General Motors's key manufacturing facilities in Flint, Michigan, on December 29, 1936, they managed to stop GM's operations in its tracks. Six weeks later, on February 11, 1937, GM's leadership formally recognized the UAW, which was part of the larger Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), as the exclusive bargaining representative for the company's factory workers.

One of the strike participants was Bob Stinson, who worked in the automotive industry from 1917 to 1962 before retiring. In this excerpt from an interview with historian Studs Terkel, Stinson recalls the daily grind of the sit-down strike. He also compares the joyful atmosphere at the end of the strike to the celebrations that washed over the United States when the Armistice agreement ending World War I was announced.

I was in Detroit, playing Santa Claus to a couple of small nieces and nephews. When I came back [to Flint], the second shift [men who worked from 4:30 p.m. to 12:30 a.m.] had pulled the plant. It took about five minutes to shut the line down. The foreman was pretty well astonished. (Laughs.)

The boys pulled the switches and asked all the women who was in Cut-and-Sew to go home. They informed the supervisors they could stay, if they stayed in their office. They told the plant police they could do their jobs as long as they didn't interfere with the workers.

We had guys patrol the plant, see that nobody got involved in anything they shouldn't. If anybody got careless with company property—such as sitting on an automobile cushion without putting burlap over it—he was talked to. You couldn't paint a sign on the wall or anything like that. You used bare springs for a bed. 'Cause if you slept on a finished cushion, it was no longer a new cushion.

Governor [Frank] Murphy said he hoped to God he would never have to use National Guard against people. But if there was damage to property, he would do so. This was right down our alley, because we invited him to the plant and see how well we were taking care of the place.

From *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression*. Copyright © 1970, 1986 by Studs Terkel. Reprinted by permission of The New Press. www.thenewpress.com.

They'd assign roles to you. When some of the guys at headquarters wanted to tell some of the guys in the plant what was cookin', I carried the message. I was a scavenger, too.

The merchants cooperated. There'd be apples, bushels of potatoes, crates of oranges that was beginnin' to spoil. Some of our members were also little farmers, they come up with a couple of baskets of junk.

The soup kitchen was outside the plant. The women handled all the cooking, outside of one chef who came from New York. He had anywhere from ten to twenty women washing dishes and peeling potatoes in the strike kitchen. Mostly stews, pretty good meals. They were put in containers and hoisted up through the window....

Most of the men had their wives and friends come down, and they'd stand inside the window and they'd talk. Find out how the family was. If the union supplied them with enough coal....

We had a ladies' auxiliary. They'd visit the homes of the guys that was in the plant. They would find out if there was any shortage of coal or food. Then they'd maneuver around amongst themselves until they found some place to get a ton of coal. Some of them even put the arm on Consumers Power if there was a possibility of having her power shut off.

Any of the wives try to talk the guys into coming out?

Some of 'em would have foremen come to their homes: "Sorry, your husband was a very good operator. But if he don't get out of the plant and away from the union, he'll never again have a job at General Motors." If this woman was the least bit scared, she'd come down and cry on her husband's shoulder. He'd more than likely get a little disturbed, get a hold of his strike captain.... Maybe we'd send a couple of women out there. Sometimes you just had to let 'em go. Because if you kept them in there, they'd worry so damn much over it, that'd start ruinin' the morale of the rest of the guys.

Morale was very high at the time. It started out kinda ugly because the guys were afraid they put their foot in it and all they was gonna do is lose their jobs. But as time went on, they begin to realize they could win this darn thing, 'cause we had a lot of outside people comin' in showin' their sympathy.

Time after time, people would come driving by the plant slowly. They might pull up at the curb and roll down the window and say, "How you guys

doin’?” Our guys would be lookin’ out the windows, they’d be singin’ songs and hollerin’. Just generally keeping themselves alive....

Nationally known people contributed to our strike fund. Mrs. [Eleanor] Roosevelt for one. We even had a member of Parliament come from England and address us.

Lotta things worked for the union we hadn’t even anticipated. Company tried to shut off the heat. It was a bluff. Nobody moved for half an hour, so they turned it back on again. They didn’t want the pipes to get cold. (Laughs.) If the heat was allowed to drop, then the pipes will separate—they were all jointed together—and then you got a problem.

Some of the time you were scared, because there was all kinds of rumors going around. We had a sheriff—he came in one night at Fisher One and read the boys the riot act. He told ‘em they had to leave. He stood there, looked at ‘em a few minutes. A couple of guys began to curse ‘im, and he turned around and left himself....

The men sat in there for forty-four days. Governor Murphy—I get emotional over him (laughs)—was trying to get both sides to meet on some common ground. I think he lost many a good night’s sleep. We wouldn’t use force. Mr. Knudsen was head of General Motors and, of course, there was John L. Lewis. They’d reach a temporary agreement and invariably the Flint Alliance or GM headquarters in Detroit would throw a monkey wrench in it. So every morning, Murphy got up with an unsolved problem.

John L. was as close to a Shakespearean actor as any I’ve ever listened. He could get up there and damn all the adversaries—he had more command of language. He made a speech that if they shoot the boys out at the plant, they’d have to shoot him first.

There were a half a dozen false starts at settlement. Finally, we got the word: THE THING IS SETTLED. My God, you had to send about three people, one right after the other, down to some of those plants because the guys didn’t believe it. Finally, when they did get it, they marched out of the plants with the flag flyin’ and all that stuff.

You’d see some guys comin’ out of there with whiskers as long as Santa Claus. They made a rule they wasn’t gonna shave until the strike was over. Oh, it was just like—you’ve gone through the Armistice delirium, haven’t you? Everybody was runnin’ around shaking everybody by the hand, sayin’,

“Jesus, you look strange, you got a beard on you now.” (Laughs.) Women kissin’ their husbands. There was a lotta drunks on the streets that night.

When Mr. Knudsen put his name to a piece of paper and says that General Motors recognizes the UAW—CIO—until that moment, we were non-people, we didn’t even exist. (Laughs.) That was the big one. (His eyes are moist.)

Source: Terkel, Studs. Interview with Bob Stinson. *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression*. New York: New Press, 2000, pp. 129-133.

IMPORTANT PEOPLE, PLACES, AND TERMS

AFL-CIO

Acronym for American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations, the largest labor organization in U.S. history.

American Federation of Labor (AFL)

Major labor organization first established by Samuel Gompers in 1886.

Apprentice

An employee who receives on-the-job training to learn a skilled trade.

Arbitration

A method of settling disputes between employers and workers in which an impartial person or panel decides the issue.

Boycott

Organized campaign that focuses on refusing to buy goods or services from a targeted employer as a way to pressure that employer to accede to worker demands regarding wages or other workplace conditions.

Brotherhood

A term used by unions of the nineteenth century to refer to their organizations.

Closed shop

A workplace in which employment is limited to workers who belong to the union that is in place there.

Collective bargaining

A type of labor negotiation in which authorized union representatives bargain with management over wages, hours, and work rules applicable to all union members for a specified length of time.

CHRONOLOGY

- 1619**
American colonists begin importing slaves to serve as manual labor. *See p. 12.*
- 1718**
Parliament passes the Transportation Act, which paves the way for exiling criminals to the colonies to provide labor. *See p. 11.*
- 1775**
American Revolution begins. *See p. 12.*
- 1786**
Philadelphia printers conduct one of the first successful strikes for higher wages. *See p. 18.*
- 1794**
The Federal Society of Journeymen Cordwainers, cited by many historians as America's first genuine trade union, is founded by shoemakers in Philadelphia. *See p. 18.*
- 1827**
The Mechanics' Union of Trade Associations, the first American union to bring together workers from more than one trade, is established. *See p. 19.*
- 1861**
The American Civil War begins. *See p. 24.*
- 1866**
National Labor Union is founded in Baltimore. *See p. 28.*
- 1867**
Reconstruction policies are enacted across the American South. *See p. 24.*
- 1869**
Knights of Labor union is organized in Philadelphia. *See p. 24.*
- 1877**
A nationwide rail strike paralyzes the American economy. *See p. 29.*
Nineteen members of the notorious Molly Maguires are executed for murder and other crimes. *See p. 27.*

SOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

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