

6.7 Labor in the Gilded Age

Theme: Work, Exchange, Technology

Learning Objective 6.E: Explain the socioeconomic continuities and changes associated with the growth of industrial capitalism from 1865 to 1898.

Economic Changes

KC-6.1.I.C As the price of many goods decreased, workers' real wages increased, providing new access to a variety of goods and services; many Americans' standards of living improved, while the gap between rich and poor grew.

- Price of goods
 - Greater consolidation, transportation, and production lowered prices
- Workers' "_____"
 - _____ increased over time regardless of _____
 - Urban families had to have multiple incomes
- Standard of Living
 - Cities was crowded, dirty
 - Development of _____ to fit more people in limited space
 - Later documented by _____, *How the Other Half Lives*
- *Wealth Gap*
 - *Richest 10% controlled 90% of wealth*
 - Stories of "self-made men" by _____ fuel workers' hopes

Organized Labor

KC-6.1.II.C Labor and management battled over wages and working conditions, with workers organizing local and national unions and/or directly confronting business leaders.

- Notable Unions
 - National Labor Union, 1866-1877
 - _____, 1877-1886
 - _____ (AFL), 1886-Present
- Tactics of Labor
 - Strikes, picketing, boycotts, slowdowns, _____
- Notable Strikes
 - _____, Haymarket Affair 1886, Homestead Strike 1892, Pullman Strike 1894
- Tactics of Management

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- _____ - used in Pullman Strike
- _____ - circulated amongst companies to avoid hiring known labor organizers
- _____ - include clauses that prohibit union membership
- _____ - private security force, escalated into violence
- _____ - Used to end Pullman Strike

Expansion of Labor Force and Child Labor

KC-6.1.II.B.i The industrial workforce expanded and child labor increased.

- Labor force increased as industrialization continued
 - _____ provided high supply of workers, often led to lower wages
 - Typical work week was ____ hrs/day, ____ days/week
- ____% of Children worked outside the home by 1900, up from ____% in 1870
 - Calls for reform begin at the end of the century
 - Photographer _____ documented child labor across the country

Recap

- Workers' wages were rising and purchasing power rose, but economic disparity still grew
- Discontent in labor led to rise of labor unions, experienced limited success in this period
- Management utilized their own tactics in dealing with unions
- Child labor became more common

Part II

Short Answer Questions

Answer the following in AT LEAST three sentences.

1. Explain the socioeconomic continuities and changes associated with the growth of industrial capitalism from 1865 to 1898.

Eugene Debs, “How I Became a Socialist” (April, 1902)

Retrieved from: <http://www.americanvawp.com/reader/20-the-progressive-era/eugene-debs-how-i-became-a-socialist-april-1902/>

Through all these years I was nourished at Fountain Proletaire. I drank deeply of its waters and every particle of my tissue became saturated with the spirit of the working class. I had fired an engine and been stung by the exposure and hardship of the rail. I was with the boys in their weary watches, at the broken engine’s side and often helped to bear their bruised and bleeding bodies back to wife and child again. How could I but feel the burden of their wrongs? How the seed of agitation fail to take deep root in my heart?

I was to be baptized in Socialism in the roar of conflict and I thank the gods for reserving to this fitful occasion the fiat, “Let there be light!”—the light that streams in steady radiance upon the Broadway to the Socialist republic.

The skirmish lines of the A. R. U. were well advanced. A series of small battles were fought and won without the loss of a man. A number of concessions were made by the corporations rather than risk an encounter. Then came the fight on the Great Northern, short sharp, and decisive. The victory was complete—the only railroad strike of magnitude ever won by an organization in America.

Next followed the final shock—the Pullman strike—and the American Railway Union again won, clear and complete. The combined corporations were paralyzed and helpless. At this juncture there were delivered, from wholly unexpected quarters, a swift succession of blows that blinded me for an instant and then opened wide my eyes—and in the gleam of every bayonet and the flash of every rifle *the class struggle was revealed*. This was my first practical lesson in Socialism, though wholly unaware that it was called by that name.

An army of detectives, thugs and murderers were equipped with badge and beer and bludgeon and turned loose; old hulks of cars were fired; the alarm bells tolled; the people were terrified; the most startling rumors were set afloat; the press volleyed and thundered, and over all the wires sped the news that Chicago’s white throat was in the clutch of a red mod; injunctions flew thick and fast, arrests followed, and our office and headquarters, the heart of the strike, was sacked, torn out and nailed up by the “lawful” authorities of the federal government; and when in company with my loyal comrades I found myself in Cook county jail at Chicago with the whole press screaming conspiracy, treason and murder....

1. Provide an Attribution for the document:
2. Use the document to support the thesis: “The growth of industrial capitalism from 1865 to 1898 in the US led to an increase in diverging viewpoints about the economy .”
3. Choose one of the analysis topics from HAPP and provide a 2 sentence analysis of the document.
4. Give an A-C-E response on a piece of outside evidence that is relevant to the document and topic of the thesis

Secondary Source Document Analysis

Read the essay and fill in the chart below. Identify one claim for each subsection of the essay and provide a piece of evidence that corresponds to the claim.

Title:	
Author:	
Historical Period and Topic:	
Thesis:	
Claims	Evidence
Identify an alternative viewpoint to the author's thesis.	
Does the author address this viewpoint by refuting or conceding to it?	

Labor Day: From Protest to Picnics



Members of Ford Local 600 of the CIO march in the Labor Day parade in Detroit Michigan, 1942. (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)

In the 1880s a surge in growth of the American labor movement led to the creation of two workers' holidays, Labor Day and May Day. May Day soon spread abroad, as European unions and socialist groups adopted it as an occasion to display their strength. Eventually the holiday came to be celebrated in almost every part of the world. In the United States, however, workers more broadly celebrated Labor Day, successfully pressing to have it made a national holiday. Today, Labor Day marks the unofficial end of summer and a chance for a final bit of vacation as much as it commemorates the toils and achievements of workers and their organizations.

The organized labor movement in the United States dates to the earliest days of the republic. However, in the nineteenth century it remained fragile, expanding during periods of economic growth but imploding during economic downturns. A depression that began in 1873 decimated the movement, but in the early 1880s, as the nation began recovering, many workers again turned to unions to better their circumstances and contest the growing power of capitalists as the nation rapidly industrialized. As they had in the past, skilled artisans played a leading role in the labor movement, but to a greater extent than before, unskilled workers joined them in organizing. New labor organizations sprang up and old ones expanded in a wave of militancy and activism that peaked in 1886 in the “great uprising of labor,” when union membership reached a new high, huge strikes shook the nation, and independent labor political parties surfaced in community after community.

To provide for mutual support among unions and allow them to act together on broad issues, craft unionists took the lead in organizing central-city labor bodies with which local unions could affiliate. In New York City, a region of labor strength, a dozen small unions banded together in 1882 to found the Central Labor Union (CLU). Members of CLU-affiliated unions came from many ethnic backgrounds, creating an unusual arena for solidarity across national and language divides. Politically, too, the CLU bridged boundaries: Most CLU leaders were socialists or radicals, but a wide range of political opinion could be found within the group.

As one of its first projects, the CLU took up a proposal to sponsor a “monster labor festival”—the beginning of what would become Labor Day—in September 1882. The CLU hoped both to unite and inspire workers and to impress the general public and politicians with the power of organized labor. To this end, it developed a plan for a parade followed by a picnic on September 5, which coincided with the scheduled opening of a convention of the Knights of Labor, the foremost national labor organization, being held in New York. Since September 5 fell on a Tuesday, participation in the day's events meant staying away from work.

The first Labor Day proved a huge success. Some 10,000 men and a few women marched in the parade, which began on lower Broadway, went past reviewing stands set up in Union Square, and then continued uptown to 42nd Street. Estimates of the size of the crowd watching the march were as high as a quarter million people. Continuing a tradition that went back to the artisan parades in the early days of the country, marchers grouped according to their craft and carried with them the tools of their trade. Carrying on another tradition of worker parades and pageants, patriotic themes figured prominently in the march, which included large American flags and a drum-and-fife corps. Banners carried by the marchers demanded, “Less Work and More Pay,” and proclaimed, “To the Workers Should Belong All Wealth,” and “Labor Built This Republic, Labor Shall Rule It.”

After the parade marchers met up with their families for a giant picnic at Wendel's Elm Park at 92nd Street and Ninth Avenue. Through the afternoon and into the evening, picnickers drank, danced, sang, watched fireworks, and generally amused themselves. While individual unions and ethnic associations often sponsored similar events, the heterogeneity of the picnic crowd was unusual, manifesting the desire of the CLU to

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represent the interests and needs of the entire working class, rather than the particular concerns of one group of workers or another.

In 1883, the CLU repeated its Labor Day festivities. The following year, the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions, a national union alliance, which in 1886 became the American Federation of Labor (AFL), called for all workers to celebrate Labor Day annually on the first Monday in September, which has remained its date ever since. Within a few years, Labor Day celebrations had become common across the country. The festivities generally followed the New York example of holding a picnic, a parade, or some combination of the two. Some of the celebrations were very large. For example, 35,000 people marched in the 1886 parade held in Chicago.

Labor Day quickly began to win official recognition. In 1885 and 1886, a few city governments designated the day an official holiday, and in 1887 Oregon made Labor Day a state holiday. By 1894, twenty-three other states had followed suit, generally at the instigation of labor or Populist lobbying. Labor Day received federal recognition in 1894, when President Grover Cleveland signed a bill, which had moved quickly through Congress with few objections, making the day a "legal public holiday." For Cleveland, who had just used federal troops to crush a nationwide railroad workers' strike, the bill provided an opportunity for a gesture of conciliation toward labor.

Even with official recognition, most employers at first did not give their workers a holiday on Labor Day. The federal law only mandated a day off for employees of the federal government and the District of Columbia. State laws, too, generally did not force private employers to give workers a day off. To celebrate the holiday, workers in effect had to go on strike for a day. Only slowly did businesses begin to close for the holiday, first in centers of union strength like New York, where by the end of the 1880s many factories and shops shut down for the day, and later in areas where labor had less clout. California businesses did not generally close for Labor Day until the early twentieth century; Georgia businesses began shutting down only well after that.

The political tone of Labor Day moderated as it evolved in relation to the rival holiday of May Day. In 1884, the same year that the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions began promoting Labor Day, it called for unions across the country to hold demonstrations and strikes on May 1, 1886, demanding an eight-hour work day. (At the time most workers worked considerably longer hours.) Workers in great numbers responded, but the eight-hour movement came to a crashing halt in the face of repression that followed a bomb explosion at a May 3, 1886 rally in Chicago's Haymarket Square, which killed eight policemen. Eight anarchists were convicted of conspiring to commit the violence, and four of them were hanged, even though there was little evidence against them. In the years that followed, May Day became an occasion for protesting the arrests of socialists, anarchists, and unionists following the Haymarket explosion, as well as for continuing to push for shorter hours. May Day jumped abroad when in 1889 an International Socialist Convention in Paris called for demonstrations on May 1 of the following year, leading to the rapid spread of May Day celebrations across Europe.

In the United States, in the face of the post-Haymarket repression, the AFL, whose city labor councils had sponsored many of the Labor Day celebrations, moved to distance itself from radicalism and to more firmly associate itself with national traditions. Accordingly, red flags, radical speakers, and internationalist slogans, all common at early Labor Day events, became forbidden.

Especially before the Haymarket riots, May Day events in a few cities rivaled the size of Labor Day events. But as the twentieth century unfolded, May Day generally did not catch on, leaving Labor Day as the main or only workers' holiday.

The deradicalization of Labor Day made it easier for the union movement to win its designation as an official holiday and to force businesses to shut for the day. This very success, though, lessened the focus of the day on organized labor, as more and more non-unionists were given the day off. In an era when six-day work weeks were common, holidays few, and paid vacations very exceptional, many workers viewed Labor Day as an opportunity to relax on their own or with their families. In the first decades of the twentieth century, the labor movement continued to sponsor parades and other events but on a less regular basis than in the past, with some cities going years at a time between marches, only holding them at moments of crisis. During the 1920s, attendance at Labor Day events tended to be modest, and the events themselves increasingly conservative, with union leaders inviting middle-class and business organizations, like the Chamber of Commerce and the Lions Club, to participate.

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The revival and expansion of the union movement during the 1930s refocused Labor Day on organized labor. Celebrations grew in size and number. In Los Angeles, a city where labor traditionally had been weak, the size of the Labor Day parade had expanded to 100,000 participants by 1941, with a half-million spectators lining the way. In the immediate post–World War II years, large Labor Day events continued to be held. It became a tradition in presidential election years for the Democratic candidate to kick off his campaign with an appearance at a Labor Day rally in Detroit.

Gradually, though, attendance at Labor Day events again began declining. As unionists moved to the suburbs, many became less interested in parades on city streets. In Detroit, a mere 6,000 marchers took part in the 1966 parade. The *Detroit News* reported that, “Workers spent the three-day holiday enjoying backyard barbecues, boats and summer cottages: the fruits of their victories.”

As attendance at Labor Day events dwindled, unions in many cities stopped sponsoring the events. A New York City Labor Day parade in 1981 was the first to be held there for thirteen years. That year labor held parades in many cities to protest President Ronald Reagan’s firing of striking air traffic controllers and, more broadly, to try to energize a movement suffering declining membership and a string of strike defeats. Some of the revived parades were massive: 200,000 marchers in New York in 1981, 170,000 marchers and onlookers in Detroit the next year. But by the 1990s, attendance waned once again, and official celebrations became less frequent.

In most of the country, Labor Day no longer has strong ties to organized labor. The president and other political leaders issue statements extolling workers, but these get little public attention. Instead, private leisure is the main order of the day. In the northern part of the country, Labor Day generally marks the end of the summer vacation season and the reopening of schools.

Still, Labor Day remains one of the few national holidays to mark the contributions of a particular segment of the population to society. (Some see Martin Luther King Jr. Day similarly, although it also fits the more common pattern of holidays marking the birth of a great leader.) The establishment of Labor Day reflected the growing power of organized labor in Gilded Age America, while the decline of its formal celebration marks the waning power of labor and the general privatization of American life.

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