

Student Essay on Nineteenth Century Organized Labor in the U.S.

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Essay

Following the Civil War, industrialism really took off in the United States. Before the war, the north had developed some industry but through reconstruction there was a big push to industrialize the south as well. Throughout the years following reconstruction, the United States became the world's biggest industrial power. During the last quarter of the 19th century, industry and big business were booming in the US. However, booming business came at the expense of laborers. In industrial conflicts during this era, the people on the business end usually won. Between 1875 and 1900, organized was very unsuccessful in improving the position of the workers.

During this period in the United States history, a new kind of immigrant was coming to the states. Previously almost all the immigrants had been from Western Europe. They assimilated well and adapted to American ways of life. However, immigrants started coming from Eastern and Southern Europe during this time. Also, Chinese immigrants came to the west. These immigrants were generally poorer and less educated than the immigrants from Western Europe. Their cultures were farther from that of America and they did not want to assimilate. These immigrants were a great source of labor for the factories. They would work for next to nothing. Because factory owners could hire these immigrants for so cheap, they didn't need to worry about paying higher wages to the Americans that had been there. This is an area where organized labor failed terribly. Trying to strike only worsened their case. Once on strike, factory owners were the ones who gained rather than the strikers, because they just filled their factories with cheap immigrant labor.

The Sherman Antitrust Act was made into law in 1890. Its purpose was to prevent monopolies by stopping anyone from restricting the flow of trade. However, during its early years it was used quite oppositely in the courts. At first, the Sherman Antitrust Act protected big business and shot down organized labor. In Homestead, Pennsylvania in 1892, steel workers experienced a lockout.

In 1894 3,000 workers from the Pullman Company went on strike. Discontented workers joined the ARU but in the end it did no good. Eventually President Cleveland claimed that the strike was interfering with the delivery of US mail and sent in 12,000 troops to brake up the strike and send the workers back to their jobs.