

Name: _____

Class: _____

Organized Labor and The Great Upheaval

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The American economy boomed during the Gilded Age in the mid to late 19th century. However, workers didn't reap the benefits and suffered from poor working conditions and few rights. During the Great Upheaval, laborers spontaneously started to unite to demand change at the turn of the 20th century. As you read, take notes on how the Great Upheaval inspired the organized labor movement in the US.

- [1] In the mid-19th century, the vast majority of American work was still done on the farm. By the turn of the 20th century, the United States economy revolved around the factory.

Most Americans living in the Gilded Age¹ knew nothing of the millions of Rockefeller, Carnegie and Morgan.² They worked 10 hour shifts, 6 days a week, for wages barely enough to survive. Children as young as eight years old worked hours that kept them out of school. Men and women worked until their bodies could stand no more, only to be released from employment without retirement benefits. Medical coverage did not exist. Women who became pregnant were often fired. Compensation for being hurt while on the job was zero.



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Come Together

Soon laborers realized that they must unite to demand change. Even though they lacked money, education, or political power, they knew one critical thing. There were simply more workers than there were owners.

1. an era of rapid economic growth from the 1870's to 1900.
2. John Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie and John Morgan were businessmen and industrialists and were some of the richest men in America during the Gilded Age

Unions did not emerge overnight. Despite their legal rights to exist, bosses often took extreme measures, including intimidation and violence, to prevent a union from taking hold. Workers, too, often chose the sword when peaceful measures failed.

- [5] Many Americans believed that a violent revolution would take place in America. How long would so many stand to be poor? Industrial titans³ including John Rockefeller arranged for mighty castles to be built as fortresses to stand against the upheaval they were sure was coming.

Slowly but surely unions did grow. Efforts to form nationwide organizations faced even greater difficulties. Federal troops were sometimes called to block their efforts. Judges almost always ruled in favor of the bosses.

The workers often could not agree on common goals. Some flirted with extreme ideas like Marxism.⁴ Others simply wanted a nickel more per hour. Fights erupted over whether or not to admit women or African Americans. Immigrants were often viewed with hostile eyes. Most did agree on one major issue — the eight-hour day. But even that agreement was often not strong enough glue to hold the group together.

Organized labor has brought tremendous positive change to working Americans. Today, many workers enjoy higher wages, better hours, and safer working conditions. Employers often pay for medical coverage and several weeks vacation. Jobs and lives were lost in the epic struggle for a fair share. The fight sprouted during the Gilded Age, when labor took its first steps toward unity. It began with the Great Upheaval.

The Great Upheaval

It started with a 10% pay cut. When leaders of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad Company ordered this second reduction in less than eight months, railroad workers in Martinsburg, West Virginia decided they had had enough. On July 16, 1877, workers in that town drove all the engines into the roundhouse and boldly declared that no train would leave until the owners restored their pay. The local townspeople gathered at the railyard to show their support for the strikers. A great showdown was on.

- [10] Strikes or other actions seen as disturbances are usually handled at the local level. The mayor of Martinsburg tried in vain to threaten the striking workers, but the crowd merely laughed and booed. The local police were far too insubstantial to match the numbers of the rabble.⁵ In

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3. **titan** (*noun*) a person or thing of great size, power, influence, or achievement.
 4. political and economic way of organizing society, where the workers own the means of production and social classes do not exist
 5. a crowd

desperation, the mayor turned to the governor of West Virginia for support. The governor sent units of the National Guard to Martinsburg to accompany the trains out of town by force of arms. There was little support for the effort among the Guardsmen, however, because a majority of them were railroad workers themselves. After two people were killed in the standoff, the Guard simply lay down their weapons and began chatting with members of the crowd.

Only when federal troops sent by President Hayes arrived did the trains leave the station. Even then they were sabotaged⁶ and harassed along their routes. Only one train reached its destination.

The Strike Spreads

The Martinsburg strike might have gone down in history as one of many small local strikes put down by force, but this time the strike spread. Soon other B & O units joined the Martinsburg strike. The movement spread into Pennsylvania, when workers on the Pennsylvania and Reading railroads joined their compatriots.⁷ Pittsburgh is the gateway to the Midwest, and so the strike widened to that region.

The police, the National Guard, and the United States Army clashed with angry mobs throughout America. Throughout the land, wealthy individuals feared that the worst had finally come. A violent revolution seemed to be sweeping the nation.

But then it stopped. In some cases the strikes were ended by force. In others, the strikers simply gave up. After all, most workers were not trying to overthrow the government or the social order. They simply wanted higher wages and more time to spend with their families. The Great Upheaval was not the first strike in American History; it was the first mass strike to involve so many different workers separated by so much space.

What Did This Mean for America?

[15] Was it successful? From a distance, it seems to have failed. However, in many cases, workers did have their demands met. There is no telling how many future pay cuts were avoided because of fear of reprisal⁸ from the laborers. The Great Upheaval was spontaneous. There was absolutely no advanced planning, showing how many rank and file workers had the same concerns about quality of life, as well as the same anger at those who controlled the wealth.

6. **sabotage** (*verb*) a secret operation or act to damage property, obstruct operations or undermine negotiations

7. a fellow citizen

8. **reprisal** (*noun*) the use of force or political tactics to strike back

More than 100,000 workers had gone on strike, shutting down nearly half of the nation's rail systems.

When the strike ended in the first week in August, over 100 people were killed and a thousand more were imprisoned. Untold millions of dollars of damage was caused to rail lines, cars, and roundhouses. The fight was over, but America had not seen the last of the mass strike.

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. What was the central idea of text?
 - A. The Great Upheaval was a single strike by railroad workers in West Virginia who refused to continue working until they received their pay.
 - B. The Great Upheaval was the largest mass strike of laborers across industries in the U.S. and it empowered laborers to advocate for their rights.
 - C. The Great Upheaval changed the power structure of laborers and bosses in America and the powerful leaders lost their monopoly over their workers.
 - D. The Great Upheaval was the largest mass strike of laborers across industries in the US, but the movement failed and didn't have an impact on the rights of laborers.

2. Which excerpt from the text supports the author's point of view that the Great Upheaval left a legacy in the labor movement in America?
 - A. "The workers often could not agree on common goals." (paragraph 7)
 - B. "After all, most workers were not trying to overthrow the government or the social order." (paragraph 14)
 - C. "There is no telling how many future pay cuts were avoided because of fear of reprisal from the laborers." (paragraph 15)
 - D. "When the strike ended in the first week in August, over 100 people were killed and a thousand more were imprisoned." (Paragraph 16)

3. Which of the following statements best describes the relationship between striking laborers and government leaders during the Great Upheaval?
 - A. Governing leaders were fully supportive of the striking laborers.
 - B. Governing leaders tended to support the bosses against the striking laborers.
 - C. Governing leaders tended to stay out of any disputes since they didn't employ the striking laborers.
 - D. Governing leaders were fully supportive of the strikes but could not condone the violent actions of the striking laborers.

4. Which statement best describes the relationship between the Great Upheaval and the organized Labor movement in America?
- A. The organized labor movement inspired the Great Upheaval.
 - B. The Great Upheaval gave the Organized labor movement a much-needed spark.
 - C. The Great Upheaval forced laborers to compromise and unite in a way that the Organized labor movement didn't.
 - D. The organized labor movement learned from the mistakes of the Great Upheaval to create a more successful movement.
5. How does the author develop the central idea over the course of the article?

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. How did the Great Upheaval lead to change in America? Why do you think laborers in the mid 19th century didn't have any rights? What rights are laborers still advocating for today?
2. How did people create change during the Great Upheaval? How are strikes still a strategy that people use today to create change? Why are strikes such a persuasive form of protest to create change?