

The History of Unions in the US

Class 1:

Origins

Jim Dunphy

dunphyjj@aol.com

Overture

Solidarity Forever:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L
y5ZKjjxMNM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ly5ZKjjxMNM)

What is a union?

An organization of workers who have come together to achieve common goals such as:

- improving safety standards
- achieving higher pay and benefits
- securing better working conditions.

What is a union?

Key is the workers coming together to united seek a common goal that will benefit all workers, and not just a specific worker

Terms

- Will from time to time revert to “unionese”
- Please let me know if I do – will probably not even realize I did!

So How about

I told the EVP to start I & I
for a new CBA, but the LMR
folks wanted to declare an
impasse, so I wanted to
check with the NVP before
going to FSIP

Or

One of the BUEs came by
the office with an issue –
not sure if we want to do G
& A, file a ULP with the
FLRA, or send an EEO

Classes

- Class 1 – Origins to 1900
- Class 2 – 1900-1945
- Class 3 – Public Sector Unions
- Class 4 – 1945 to the present

On a personal note

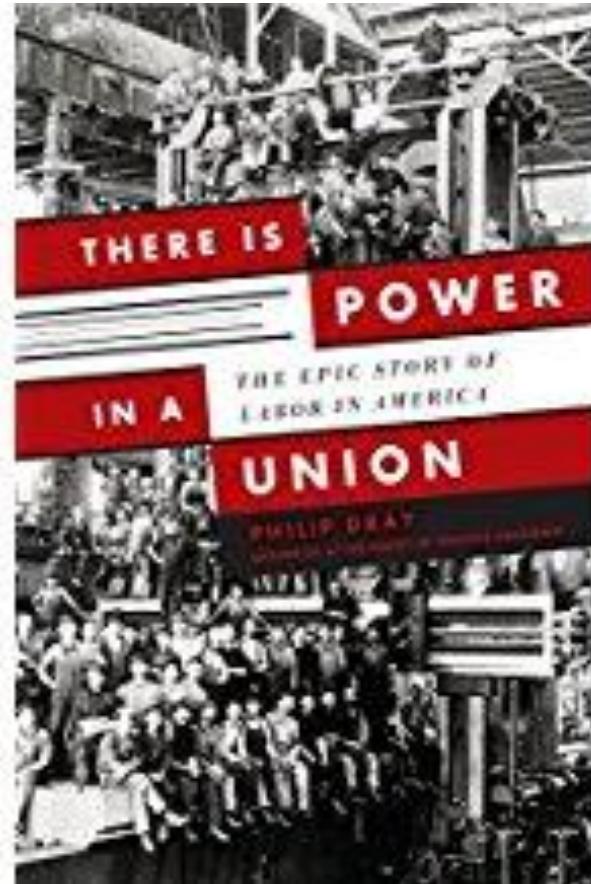
- My family have been union members for almost 100 years
 - Grandfather – TWU
 - Father – UFA/UFOA
 - Me – AFGE/NEA

On a personal note

- So this class takes the conclusion unions are good – they mess up sometimes, but are good
- OLLI would be more than happy to have a class argue the opposite, but that is not this one

Best Single Volume

- There have been many books written about unions – some of which I will mention.
- Probably the best single volume is *There is Power in a Union* by Philip Dray



Early American Industry

- Most industry in the colonial and Early American time periods was home or small based, with just a few employees
- Many employees were actually apprentices, who were in the process of learning the craft
- Items were individually made, requiring a high level of individual skill



Industrial Revolution

- Started in Great Britain at the end of the 18th Century
- Used water and steam power to work machines
- Began standardization of parts and procedures
- Allowed for much larger scale enterprises



Lowell

- First large scale textile factory in US
- Used machines and plans smuggled out of England
- The workers were young women off the farms in New England



Sarah Bagley

- First came to work at Lowell in 1835
- After a series of wage cuts due to depressions, Bagley formed the Lowell Female Reform Association and began to publish a newspaper, the Voice of Industry



Sarah Bagley

- The Association provided the Massachusetts Legislature with a petition for a 10 hour day.
- Forced to respond to the petition, the Legislature formed a committee in 1845, which looked into the issue but found no basis for state action.

Sarah Bagley

- A second committee also found that this was an issue between employer and employee, not the state
- Faced with political and worker pressure, the mills reduced the work day to by 30 minutes in 1847 and to 11 hours in 1853

Sarah Bagley

- A new, male President of the Voice of Industry fired Bagley in 1846.
- Discouraged by what she saw as male privilege over a largely female work place, she left Lowell and union activities shortly thereafter.

Legal Basis of Unions

- As the Industrial Revolution changed working conditions in Lowell and elsewhere, the legal basis of unions became an issue.
- Common law and numerous court cases held that labor unions were an “illegal combination.”

Commonwealth v. Hunt – Facts

- In Boston, the Boston Journeymen Bootmaker's Society agreed on a wage of \$2.00 per boots produced
- A bootmaker, Jeremiah Horne, agreed to work on boots without fee, and was fined by the Society
- When Horne continued to do so, the Society threatened a walk out at Horne's employer, so the employer fired Horne

Commonwealth v. Hunt – Facts

- Horne filed a complaint with the County Attorney, and attempted to reach a settlement with the Society
- When the settlement failed, the County Attorney brought in an indictment against the Society and its leaders.
- The basis of the indictment was the Society was a criminal conspiracy

Commonwealth v. Hunt – Trial Court

- The prosecution argued that the Society was coercive and did not allow for freedom of contract
- Defense stressed the benefits of membership and that there were many professional societies of lawyers and doctors who operated in a similar manner

Commonwealth v. Hunt – Trial Court

- The trial judge's charge was that if such a society was allowed, it would *render property insecure, and make it the spoil of the multitude, would annihilate property, and involve society in a common ruin*
- To no great surprise, the jury held for the prosecution, and the defense appealed to the Massachusetts Supreme Court

Commonwealth v. Hunt – Supreme Court

- Decision was written by Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw
- Not considered a friend of labor
- In a case decided shortly before *Hunt*, Shaw found that employers were not responsible for workplace injuries if a fellow employee was partially to blame (the fellow servant rule)



Commonwealth v. Hunt – Supreme Court

- Shaw concluded that prior English precedents were not appropriate, in a new industrial environment.
- In this environment, both workmen's and business associations would arise
- Workers had the right to organize and deny their labor, as long as they did so peacefully.

Commonwealth v. Hunt – Supreme Court

- On the issue of criminal conspiracy, Shaw held, that to be a conspiracy, a combination would have to have as its goal:

To accomplish some criminal or unlawful purpose, or to accomplish some purpose, not in itself criminal or unlawful, by criminal or unlawful means

- Shaw found nothing unlawful or criminal in fining a bootmaker

Commonwealth v. Hunt – Significance

- In general, *Hunt* held that labor combinations which used legal means to reach legal ends were not unlawful
- However, it did allow for prosecution if the means or ends were not lawful
- In post Civil War era, this latter teaching was used to criminalize some union behavior.

Civil War and Industrialization

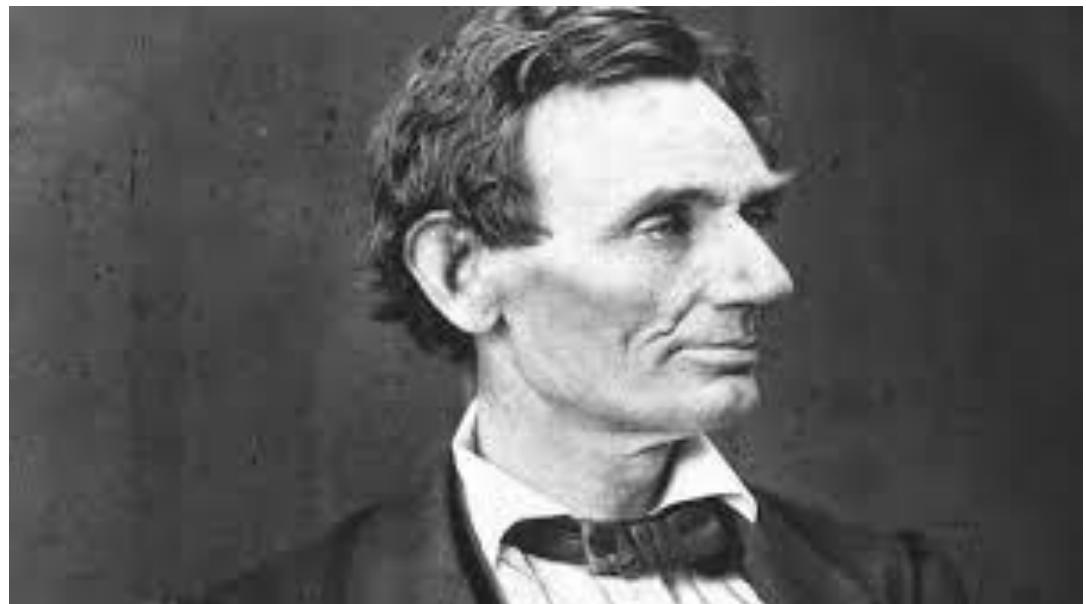
- In the spring of 1860, shoemakers in Lynn MA marched and organized after wage cuts and downsizing
- Management did not give in to demands, but with the onset the next year of the Civil War, the demand for shoes allowed for full employment and an increase in wages
- Like Lowell, Lynn did not win concrete benefits but showed growing militancy among workers.

Lincoln and Lynn

In March 1860, when Presidential Candidate Abraham Lincoln was asked about the Lynn actions, he replied:

I am glad to see that a system of labor prevails in New England under which laborers can strike if they want to....

Where they are not obliged to labor whether you pay them or not. I like a system which lets a man quit when he wants to, and wish it would prevail everywhere.



Civil War and Industrialization

- By 1870, for the first time in US history, there were more people working in industry than agriculture
- New trade unions were formed, such as the National Typographical Union and the Iron Molders Union
- The latter union soon had 7,000 workers in 53 locals

National Labor Union

- The first national labor federation, the National Labor Union (NLU) was formed in 1866
- Worked towards moving away from the gold standard and workers cooperatives
- Principal goal was the 8 hour day

William Sylvis (1828-1869)

- First began working as an iron molder in 1846
- While working in Philadelphia, became active in the trade union movement and was one of the founders of the Iron Molders Union
- While not an early leader, was elected the third president in 1868
- He died shortly thereafter in 1869



National Labor Union

- The initial union included both women and blacks, under the direction of Sylvis
- Rank and file was not happy with this, so by 1869, a Colored National Labor Union was formed, and women were likewise relegated to a secondary status

National Labor Union

- After Sylvis' death, the idea of a National Labor Party was dropped
- The NLU became aligned with the Democratic Party, and endorsed Horace Greeley in 1872
- The impetus became more political than workers rights, like the 8 hour day, and without Sylvis' leadership, the organization faltered and eventually disbanded

Coal Mines



- Always a dangerous profession, a major accident took place at the Avondale Mine in September 1869
 - 179 died
 - Much of the deaths attributable to limited exits from the mine
 - Only limited union activity in mines before then

John Siney and the WBA



- The Workers Benevolent Association (WBA), founded during the Civil War, was one of the first miners unions
- After Avondale, successfully got a law passed to require multiple exits from mines, and increased inspectors
- The WBA also founded the first Miners Hospital
- Even with improved safety, there were still over 500 deaths in mines between 1870 and 1875.



Molly Maguires

Many of the workers were first generation Irish, and members of the Ancient Order of Hibernians .

Molly Maguires

- While the AOH was a non violent benevolent society, some members formed the Molly Maguires, a violent gang
- Named after a mythical tenant rebel, the Mollies were founded during the Civil War and fought conscription

Molly Maguires

- They also assaulted scab workers, and were seen by many Irish workers as the only defenders of their class.
- After Siney and the WBA were successful on a number of issues, there was relative stability, particularly after an agreement was signed covering 85% of the workers

Franklin Gowen and the Coal Operators

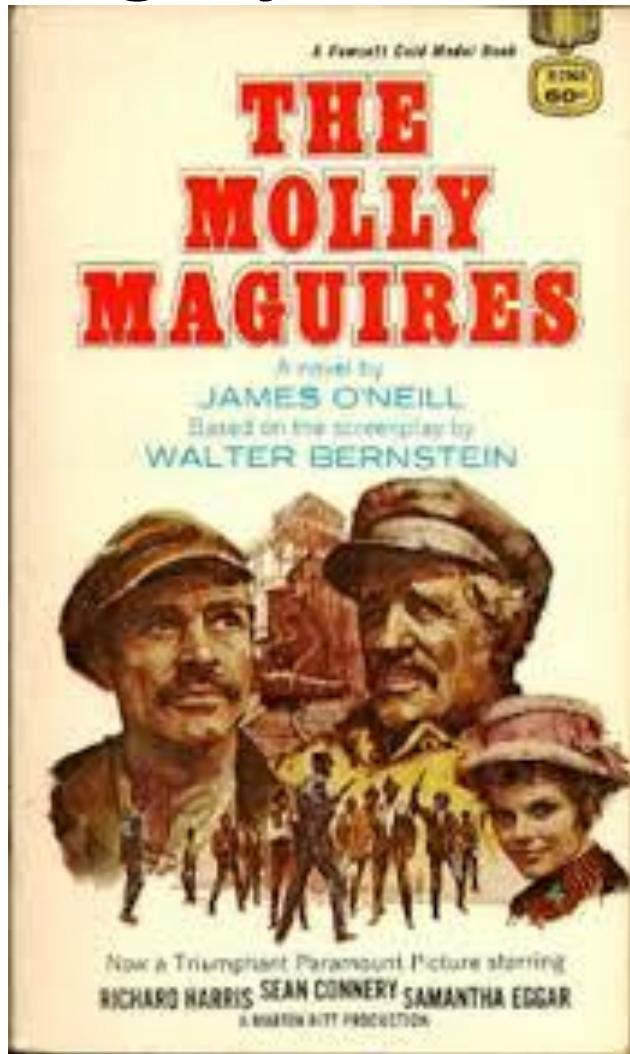


- Gowen was the President of the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad, and was a key ally of the coal operators.
- Subsequent to the Panic of 1873, the WBA went out on strike against lowered wages and worsening working conditions.

Franklin Gowen and the Coal Operators

- After a series of murders, Gowen had the Mollies infiltrated by Pinkerton Agents, which led to a series of trials and executions
- Because of its proximity to the Mollies, and its failure to win the strike, the WBA was destroyed as a viable representative of the workers.

Legacy



- Made into a 1970 movie, starring Sean Connery and Richard Harris, with Harris portraying a Pinkerton detective
- Emphasizing social conflict rather than action, the movie was a box office failure.

Strike of 1877



- As a result of the Panic of 1873, union membership declined greatly.
- There was also a series of layoffs, leading to much higher unemployment
- A target for anger was the railroads, who were not only powerful but who also had a poor record with their workers.

Strike of 1877

- The strike started in Martinsburg WV after the B & O Railroad cut wages for the third time in a year.
- The workers refused to let trains through, and local militia refused to attack the strikers
- The Governor of WV called for federal troops to put down the strike

Strike of 1877

- The strike soon spread to NY, Baltimore, Chicago, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia and other cities in PA
- In St Louis, in addition to actions at the rail yard, a general strike was called and shut down the city.

Strike of 1877

- The St Louis general strike also had as issues the 8 hour day and a ban on child labor
- The strike was broken after 45 days by the use of federal troops

Strike of 1877 - Aftermath

- Employers took two tracks – one getting conspiracy statutes passed to block union activity and beefing up the National Guard
- The second was to try and offset strikes by increasing benefits

Strike of 1877 - Aftermath

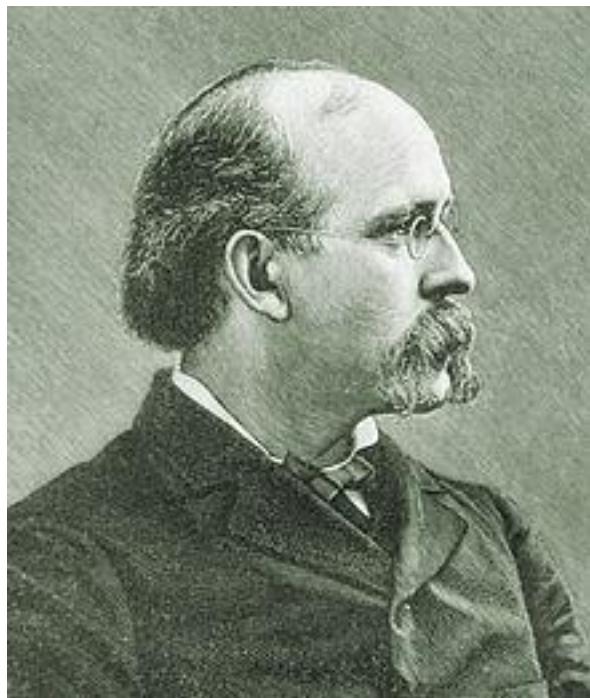
- In particular, the B & O provided coverage for workplace injuries and death, and a pension plan
- The workers, who generally were not organized in the strike, began to create umbrella unions, such as the Knights of Labor.

Knights of Labor



- Knights were formed out of a tailors' union in Philadelphia.
- First president was Uriah Stephens, and was instituted in December 1869.
- By 1880, had 28,000 members, and by 1886, over 800,000 members
- This represented 20% of all workers

Knights of Labor



- With the collapse of the NLU, the Knights became the most important union.
- Stephens was replaced by Terrence Powderly, who was greatly influenced by the Workers Benevolent Association.
- The Knights represented all types of employees, which was both a strength and weakness

Knights of Labor

- The National leadership allowed for blacks, Asians and women to join, but also allowed local organizations (particularly in the South) to preclude blacks
- Among the issues the Knights fought for were:
 - 8 hour day
 - End to child and convict labor
 - Graduated income tax

Knights of Labor

- While many Knights (including Powderly) were Catholic, their secret rituals made Catholic bishops think the Knights were similar to the Masons, and therefore not an organization Catholics should join
- Powderly eschewed political action, but many of his members did not.

Knights of Labor – Decline

- The Knights were associated with the Haymarket riots
- Many workers wanted to be in unions dedicated to their particular craft
- Powderly left in 1894, pursuing a political and administrative career.
- By the mid 1890's the Knights were under 100,000

Samuel Gompers and the AFL



- Gompers was born in London in 1850, and moved to the US in 1863, settling in New York city.
- He began working as a cigar maker at home and then in cigar stores.
- At age 14 he became a member of a Cigar Makers Local, and by age 25 elected President of the Local. He later rose to national office in the Cigar Makers union.

Gompers and the AFL

- In 1881, Gompers was one of the founders of the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions
- This was reorganized in 1886 as the American Federation of Labor (AFL), with Gompers as President
- Gompers would essentially remain President of the AFL until his death in 1924

Gompers and the AFL

- The AFL was organized around skilled craft unions
- Central leadership, but decentralized control to the labor federations.
- Emphasis was on fundamental and achievable goals – not looking for a revolution in labor management relations

Gompers and the AFL

- Non skilled labor was not welcome in the AFL
- Nor were blacks
- Gompers and the central leadership fought hard against socialism

Haymarket



- The Federation of Organized Trades (remember them?) set May 1, 1886 as the date for nationwide marches in support of the 8 hour day
- Hundreds of thousands marched and struck on that day
- On May 3, there was a march on the McCormick Harvester Company, and police killed 4 of the marchers

Haymarket



- August Spies (left) addressed the crowd and called for a mass meeting in Haymarket Square for the next day
- The rally, attended by about 2000, began peacefully and was surrounded by plainclothes police
- British socialist Samuel Fielden was the last speaker and finished at about 1030
- By then, it was raining and most of the crowd had left

Haymarket

- Police Inspector John Bonfield then ordered the crowd to disperse and the police moved forward to do so
- At that time, a bomb was thrown, killing one policeman and wounding six others
- Gunshots then broke out – never proved who fired first, but most evidence is that the police did
- By the time the affair was over, 7 police and 4 workers were dead.

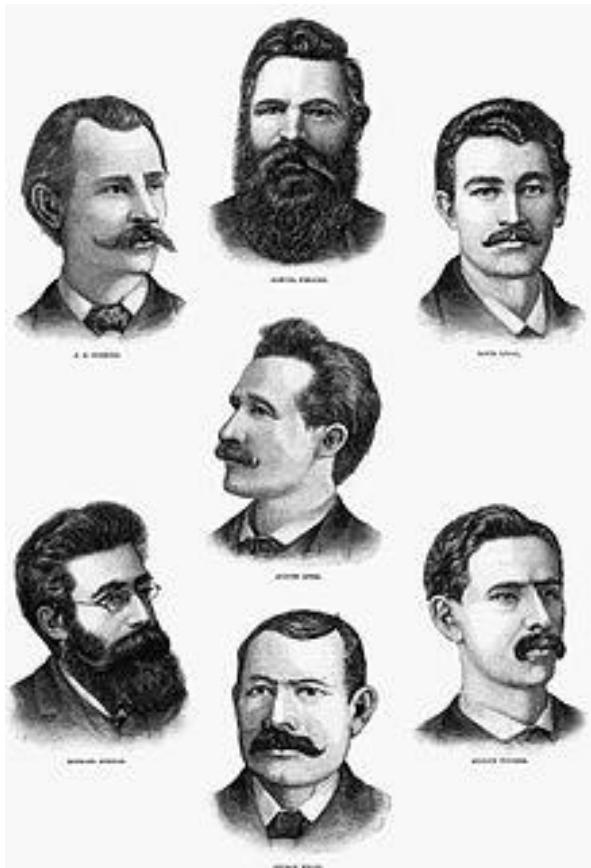
Haymarket

- Investigation followed quickly, and police assumed that an anarchist was the bomb thrower.
- Eventually, eight men were charged and tried for the conspiracy in the bombing and the deaths of the police officers.
- Most were immigrants, predominately from Germany

Haymarket

- The trial judge displayed open hostility towards the defense, and all 12 jurors were native born and non laborers.
- All eight men were found guilty and seven were sentenced to hanging and one to 15 years
- Two of the seven had their terms commuted to life in prison and one committed suicide before being executed.
- The remaining 4 defendants, including Spies, were hung on November 11, 1887

Haymarket Aftermath



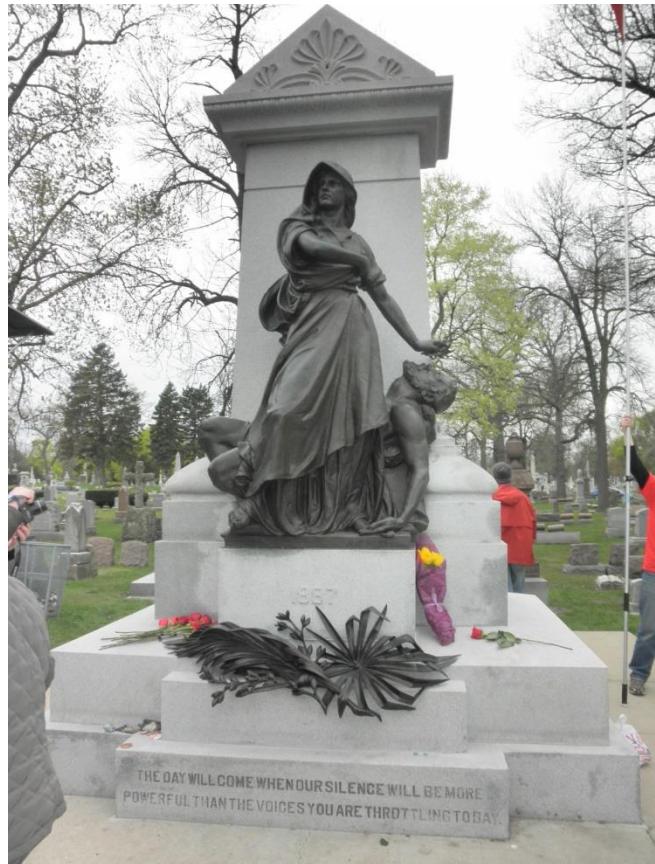
- Scores of protests occurred after the executions
- The actual bomber was never brought to trial, and has never been positively identified
- In the short run, Haymarket was a defeat for the eight hour day, but in the long term, increased worker militancy

Haymarket Pardons



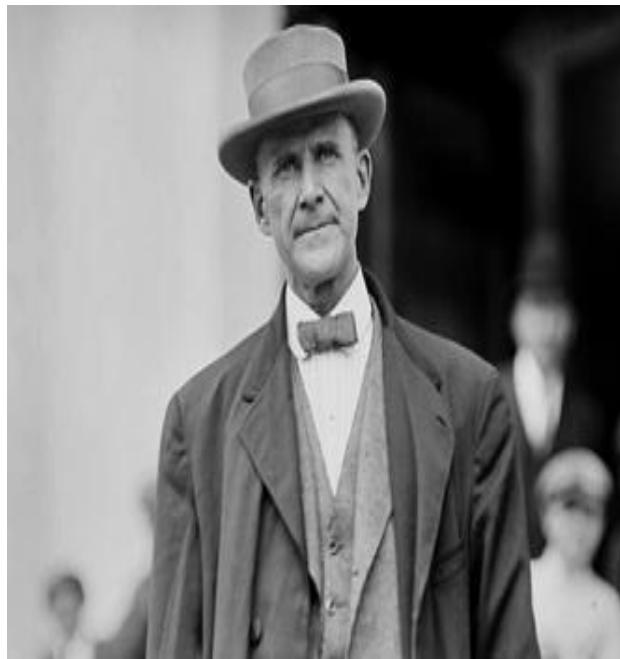
- Continuing protests, particularly among writers and other intellectuals, kept the issue alive.
- In June 1893, Governor John Peter Altgeld, himself a German immigrant, signed pardons for the remaining three imprisoned defendants.
- As a result of this action, he was defeated for reelection

Haymarket Legacy



- A monument to the executed men was erected in 1893
- In 2011, it was restored and rededicated
- Haymarket remains a turning point in union history

Eugene Debs and the Pullman Strike



- Eugene Debs was born in 1855 and started life as a Democrat, being elected to the Indiana House
- He joined the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen in 1875, rising to General Secretary
- He organized the American Railway Union in 1893, and successfully struck the Great Northern Railway in 1894

The Pullman Company



- The Pullman Company, under the ownership of George Pullman, built luxury railroad cars (hence the workers were part of the American Railway Union)
- The workers lived in a company town, paying rent to the company and being under their rules
- In 1893, a panic led to 25% lower wages, but not lower costs to the people living in the company town

The Pullman Strike

- In May 1894, a delegation of workers met with management to discuss the issues, and management vowed there would be no reprisals
- The next day, three of the committee were discharged due to what management called previously ordered staff reductions.
- That evening, Pullman workers voted to strike

The Pullman Strike

- At a convention of the ARU in June 1894, the delegates voted not to handle any Pullman cars
- The boycott spread, and management got an injunction against the strike under the Anti Trust law
- Federal troops from Fort Sheridan surrounded the epicenter of the strike in Chicago
- Debs and other leaders were arrested and imprisoned

The Pullman Strike

- The ARU requested the support of the AFL and were turned down.
- With the leaders imprisoned, the strike was broken in August 1894, and the leaders of the strike were not rehired (and therefore thrown out of company housing)
- Debs was convicted of violating the federal injunction, and sentenced to six months in prison

The Pullman Strike – Aftermath

- The workers realized that the federal government was against them, and that any improvement in their condition would have to come from collective action
- Pressured by Governor Altged, President Cleveland created a panel to look into the causes of the strike, and found that Pullman's paternalism was largely the cause.

The Pullman Strike – Aftermath

- In 1898, the Illinois Supreme Court ordered Pullman to divest of his company town, which became part of Chicago
- In 1894, in an attempt to conciliate with organized labor, President Cleveland designated Labor Day a federal holiday.

Final Aftermath



- Three years after the strike, in 1897, George Pullman died
- Before his death, because he feared his remains would be disturbed by angry workers, he designed a special tomb.
- His lead-lined coffin was sunk in a concrete block and placed in a tomb made of reinforced concrete covered with asphalt and tarpaper, followed by a layer of steel rails bolted at right angles with another layer of concrete poured on top

Socialism and the lack of a Labor Party



- In February 1900, the British Labor Party was founded, as a workers' alternative to the Liberal Party
- The Labor Party was socialist in nature
- While there would be a minor socialist party in the US, no labor based party was ever created

Alternates to a workers party

- Fighting Bob Lafollette and the Progressive Party
- The Democratic-Farmer Labor Party in Minnesota
- Vito Marcantonio and the American Labor Party in NY
- More about these parties later.

Next week

Labor relations 1900-1945