

COMPARISON OF GILDED AGE LABOR UNIONS / SOCIALIST PARTY

Choose TWO of the following organizations and explain their strategies for advancing the interests of workers. To what extent were these organizations successful in achieving their objectives? Confine your answer to the period from 1875 to 1925.

Knights of Labor

American Federation of Labor

Socialist Party of America

Industrial Workers of the World

(2009)

Knights of Labor (Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor)

Background:

- Founded 1869 by Philadelphia garment cutters, Uriah S. Stephens; 1878, held its first general assembly as national organization; 1879-93, led by Terence V. Powderly (elected Grand Master); other leader: Mary Harris Jones (“Mother Jones”).
- Secret during its first ten years; began recruiting other workers in 1870s.
- Industrial union: organized skilled and unskilled workers in assemblies, anyone who worked for wages (excluded “nonproducers”: lawyers, doctors, bankers, professional gamblers, and liquor-sellers); included women—[conflicting numbers] 3,000 in 1886, 50,000 in 1886, 65,000 at Knights’ peak—and African Americans (but were in separate assemblies); excluded Chinese/Asian immigrants.
- 9,000 members in 1879; 42,000 in 1882; 100,000 in 1885; peak membership of [conflicting numbers] 703,000–750,000–800,000 in 1886; 260,000 in 1888; 100,000 in 1890.

Program, Strategies, Results:

- Favored reform of economic system.
- Wanted more economic power for workers (“producing classes”) and alternatives to the “wage system”; end to partnership between government and corporate monopoly; end to trusts; restrictions on child labor; health and safety laws for workers; graduated income tax; more homestead land; monetary and banking reform; equal pay for equal work of both sexes; bureau of labor statistics; mechanics’ lien laws; end to convict labor.
- Favored a “cooperative commonwealth.”
- Wanted producers’ and consumers’ cooperatives (workers made all decisions on prices, wages, and shared all the profits); local assemblies founded cooperatives (Our Girls Cooperative Manufacturing Company, Chicago seamstresses 1880s; cooperative cigar shops, grocery stores); most could not compete with larger businesses and failed; some failed due to lack of capital and poor organization.
- National leadership did not approve of strikes, but local assemblies often used them, particularly by the 1880s; successful strikes against Union Pacific Railroad (1884) and Jay Gould (Wabash Railroad 1885), but failed strike against Texas and Pacific Railroad (1886).
- Preferred peaceful boycotts.
- Women in Knights: many were recruited by Mary Harris Jones; 1886, created special department within Knights to investigate women and child labor, women’s pay; ran daycare centers for children of wage-earning mothers; sometimes created cooperative kitchens.
- Favored eight-hour workday:
 - Knights helped to revive eight-hour movement in the 1880s.
 - May 1, 1886: demonstrations by “more than a third of a million” workers for the eight-hour day resulted in 200,000 getting shorter hours.
 - Chicago Packingtown workers joined the Knights en masse.
 - Favored ban on Chinese immigration to prevent lowered wages and loss of jobs (Chinese Exclusion Act, 1882).
 - 1884, Bureau of Labor Statistics created in federal government.
 - 1884, national law enacted providing for arbitration of labor disputes.
 - Pushed for prohibition of contract labor and repeal of 1864 Contract Labor Act; government passed Labor Contract Act (Foran Act or Contract Labor Law) in 1885 that prohibited importation of contracted labor.

- Haymarket Square incident, Chicago, May 4, 1886: rally held to protest killing of four strikers against McCormick Harvester; bomb thrown into the crowd killed a policeman; police opened fire. Labor unions, including the Knights, were blamed; after the incident, employers refused to bargain with unions; Packingtown firms blacklisted labor organizers and returned to 10-hour day.
- Employers circulated blacklists of union supporters and organizers; used lockouts, company spies, yellow-dog contracts, strikebreakers, injunctions against unions.
 - Knights pushed aside in the later 1880s by AFL; craft unions left Knights for AFL; union declined after 1893.

American Federation of Labor (AFL)

Background:

- Grew from Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Union in 1881; reorganized as AFL in 1886 (25 labor groups of 150,000 workers joined; 12 national unions, 140,000 affiliated members); strengthened in the late 1890s and early 1900s; 270,000 members in 1897, including 58 national unions; 1.7 million in 1904; 2 million 1914; 2.5 million in 1917, with 11 national unions and 127 locals; 4–5 million in 1920.
- Samuel Gompers, president 1886–1924; William Green, president in 1924.
- Membership limited to skilled White male workers only in craft unions; excluded unskilled workers, racial minorities, immigrants; believed that women should not be factory workers (women would lower wages), but two locals (Cigar Makers' Union, Typographers' Union) allowed women; some AFL unions allowed skilled and unskilled (United Mine Workers).
- Federation of self-governing trade unions—each local controlled its own members, but all locals were linked by executive council that coordinated strategy during boycotts and strikes.
- Affiliates eventually included Amalgamated Iron, Steel and Tin Workers, United Mine Workers of America (UMW), Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, International Association of Machinists, Amalgamated Clothing Workers, International Ladies Garment Workers.

Program, Strategies, Results:

- “Business unionism”; “pure and simple unionism”; “trade unionism, pure and simple.”
- Accepted capitalism and the wage system.
- Persuaded employers to recognize AFL and bargain collectively for better working conditions, higher wages, shorter hours (“bread and butter goals”), closed shop, union-preference shop (employer could hire nonunion if union members were not available).
- Use of the strike against employers who refused to bargain.
- Supported “family wage” earned by men; women should be in the home (but AFL did support equal pay for women who worked; also believed that employers would not hire women at equal pay so women would leave the workforce).
- Did not align with any political party; supported the candidates who supported labor.
- Extended influence through different facets of American society in late nineteenth century and nurtured image of “civic responsibility”: supported strikers; worked with social activists; got support from women’s clubs, church groups, state legislatures (Illinois Factory Investigation Act 1893—state funds used to examine working conditions and improve those of women and children in sweatshops).
- 1890s, Gompers worked within National Civic Federation, which accepted the right of collective bargaining for “responsible unions.”
- Local politicians courted their votes; Labor Day became national holiday in 1894.

Homestead Steel Strike, 1892: Amalgamated Iron, Steel and Tin Workers (most powerful union of AFL) struck against Carnegie Steel; Henry Clay Frick lowered wages and tried to break the union; confrontation between strikers and Pinkertons, and eventually Pennsylvania National Guard; strike lasted four months and eventually failed; Carnegie cut 25 percent of its workforce, extended the workday, and cut wages by 25 percent; by 1900, all major Northeast steel plants rejected the Amalgamated union.

- Employers circulated blacklists of union supporters and organizers; used lockouts, company spies, yellow-dog contracts, strikebreakers, private police and guards, injunctions against unions (Sherman Antitrust Act used against unions).
- AFL hurt by depression (1893) and failed strikes.
- Anthracite coal strike (1902), UMW: Theodore Roosevelt intervened to settle between strikers and management.
- 1903, National Association of Manufacturers began “open shop” campaign.
- *Loewe v. Lawlor*, 1908 (Danbury Hatters' Case): federal court ruled that secondary boycotts were conspiracies in restraint of trade and therefore illegal under Sherman Antitrust Act.
- Clayton Antitrust Act (1914) stated that labor organizations were not combinations in restraint of trade; Gompers called the act the Magna Carta of labor; in reality, the act did little to further the cause of unions.
- Ludlow Massacre, 1914: UMW strike against Colorado coal mines, September 1913–April 1914; governor ordered Colorado National Guard into area and then removed most of them; coal companies hired private mine guards; confrontation between strikers and private guards/state guards resulted in troops burning strikers’ tent city, killing 14 (among them 11 children); miners attacked southern Colorado mines; Woodrow Wilson sent in U.S. Army.

- First World War helped AFL; AFL supported the war; Gompers appointed to National War Labor Board (NWLB) 1918; NWLB supported many AFL goals, including eight-hour days and right to organize; Gompers and AFL promised not to strike or ask for union shops (although some locals did strike).
- 1919, AFL started massive campaign to organize steel workers.
- 1919 strikes:
 - Involved over four million workers in 3,600 strikes.
 - Federal troops broke strikes (i.e., Seattle shipyards and then a general strike).
 - Steel strikes, 1919–1920 against U.S. Steel failed; at first AFL endorsed steel strikes, but then did not.
- Antiunion campaign in early 1920s:
 - Employers associated unions with communism and disloyalty.
 - Used yellow-dog contracts.
 - “The American plan” backed by National Association of Manufacturers, Chamber of Commerce; pushed open shop.
 - Company unions (U.S. Steel, International Harvester).
 - “Welfare capitalism” used by businesses to defuse unions (International Harvester, Ford, General Electric, Bethlehem Steel); provided benefit plans, recreational facilities, sometimes profit-sharing.
 - Total union membership dropped to 3.5 million in 1926.
- U.S. government very antiunion in early 1920s:
 - *Duplex Printing Press Co v. Deering*, 1921: Supreme Court upheld illegality of secondary boycott; supported right of courts to issue injunctions against strikers.
 - *Colorado Coal Company v. United Mine Workers*, 1922: Supreme Court ruled that a striking union could be prosecuted for illegal restraint of trade.
 - 1922: Justice Department helped to stop a strike by 400,000 railroad workers and a nationwide strike by 650,000 miners.
 - 1924: courts refused to protect members of UMW against coal mine owners in western Pennsylvania.
- William Green, AFL president in 1924: wanted cooperation with business; opposed to communism and socialism; discouraged the use of strikes.

Socialist Party of America (SPA)

Background:

- Founded 1901 (merger of Social Democratic Party of America and members of Socialist Labor Party).
- Leaders: Eugene V. Debs (became a socialist after the failure of the Pullman strike (1894) and his subsequent imprisonment as leader of American Railway Union); Bill Haywood on SPA Executive Committee until 1912; Victor Berger, congressman (WI); Morris Hillquit (NY); Mother Jones spoke for SPA; W.E.B. Du Bois joined 1910–1912 and saw himself as a socialist even after he left party; attracted intellectuals, trade unionists, reformers; Daniel DeLeon (Socialist Labor Party) as a precursor to SPA.
- Membership around 100,000 in 1908; [conflicting numbers for 1912 membership] 118,000–150,000 in 1912; over 1,000 Socialists in elective office in 33 states, 160 cities in 1912; 40,000 in 1919.
- Strength in trans-Mississippi South and West (mining regions of Idaho, Montana); former Populist areas (i.e., among tenant farmers in Oklahoma and former Populists in Kansas); manufacturing towns in Northeast; Lower East Side of New York City (immigrant workers, Jewish reform tradition; 1914, elected Socialist Meyer London to Congress); Milwaukee (Socialist Emil Seidel elected mayor in 1910; Victor Berger, congressmen representing Milwaukee).

Program, Strategies, Results:

- Socialists differed in their goals: some wanted abolition of capitalism to be replaced by cooperative commonwealth with workers controlling means of production; some wanted nationalization of major industries while allowing some small free enterprise.
- Some supported free college education; labor laws to improve working conditions; minimum wage; shorter hours; public ownership of railroads, factories, banking system; government assistance to unemployed.
- Some favored working within electoral politics while others wanted direct action.
- Some rejected many progressive proposals as reformist and inadequate to solve nation's problems.
- Used newspapers to spread its message (*Appeal to Reason*: published in Girard, Kansas; circulation of 700,000 in 1912; largest weekly newspaper in the country in 1912); sponsored 5 English-language daily newspapers, 8 foreign-language dailies, 300 weekly newspapers; monthly newspapers; *The Masses* published 1911–1917.
- Ran candidates for president (they always lost):
 - Debs (ran under Social Democratic Party in 1900; under 100,000 votes), 1904: polled 3 percent of popular vote or approximately 400,000 votes; 1908: polled 2.8 percent of popular vote or approximately 421,000 votes; 1912: polled 6 percent of popular vote or approximately 900,000 votes; 1920: polled 3.4 percent of popular vote or approximately 920,000 votes.
 - A. L. Benson, 1916: polled 3.2 percent of popular vote.
- Opposed First World War.
- Victor Berger, Socialist congressman, Milwaukee, convicted under Espionage Act and stripped of his House seat for his editorials in Milwaukee *Leader* calling World War I a capitalist conspiracy; sentenced to 20 years.
 - U.S. Post Office prohibited mailing of Socialist publications (*The Masses*).
- June 1918: Debs arrested and convicted by federal government for violating Sedition Act for giving a speech defending antiwar protesters; sentenced to 10 years; imprisoned for 32 months; conviction upheld by U.S. Supreme Court (*Debs v. United States*, 1919); Debs pardoned by Harding on Christmas Day 1921
- Red Scare 1919–1920:
 - 1919 Palmer Raids went after subversives (including Socialists, Communists, anarchists, IWW, Union of Russian Workers).
 - New York State Assembly refused to seat five elected Socialist Party members.
- Supported Robert M. La Follette on Progressive ticket in 1924 presidential election.

Industrial Workers of the World (IWW or Wobblies)

Background:

- Founded 1905, Chicago, by members of Western Federation of Miners, Socialist leaders, former Knights, radicals, Eugene Debs, Daniel DeLeon (had been influential in Socialist Labor Party in 1890s).
- Leaders: William D. “Big Bill” Haywood; Elizabeth Gurley Flynn; Joseph Ettor, Carlo Tesca, Joe Hill.
- Industrial union that included every laborer, excluded nobody (“One Big Union”); concentrated on immigrant labor, miners, lumberers, sailors, harvest workers, casual labor; sought those excluded by AFL.
- Some members identified with both IWW and Socialist Party between 1905 and 1913.
- More successful in West (lumber camps, mines, wheat farms) than East.
- Membership never was more than 150,000; membership grew in 1916–1917.

Program, Strategies, Results:

- Believed in constant struggle between “working class” and “employing class” and abolition of wage system; IWW Charter: “Between these two classes a struggle must go on until the workers of the world unite as a class, take possession of the earth and the machinery of production, and abolish the wage system.”
- Supported the use of the strike, particularly the general strike, and direct action.
- Appealed to class-consciousness among workers.
- Supported workers’ revolution; denounced capitalism; wanted workers to control means of production and eventually abolish the state.
- Tried to build immigrant solidarity: appealed to immigrants through the languages of the immigrants (leaflets, posters, banners); insisted that ethnic workers be represented by their own nationals on strike committees.
- IWW organizers used songs, street corner speeches, ad hoc organizational meetings; cities tried to stop them (Los Angeles, Spokane, Denver) by prohibiting outdoor meetings.
- IWW supported local unionists in their strike efforts:

- 1909 strike in McKees Rocks, Pennsylvania, against U.S. Steel.
- 1912 “Bread and Roses” strike, Lawrence, Massachusetts; IWW assisted textile workers who eventually got union recognition.
- 1913 Paterson, New Jersey, silk workers’ strike failed.
- IWW leaders opposed United States’ entry into First World War.
- 1917, IWW timber workers’ strike in Washington and Idaho; federal government needed wood for war effort and went after IWW leaders.

- July 1917, Bisbee, Arizona, IWW organized peaceful strike against Phelps-Dodge mining company; local vigilantes deported 1,400 miners at gunpoint to Columbus, New Mexico; AFL protested and IWW tried to expose the deportation.
- August 1917: IWW leader Frank Little lynched in Butte, Montana.
- September 1917: Woodrow Wilson sent Justice Department agents to arrest IWW members under Espionage Act; Haywood and others were found guilty, with Haywood sentenced to 20 years; Haywood fled to Russia while out of prison on appeal.
- 1917–1919: state governments passed laws against IWW.
- November 1919, Centralia, Washington: American Legionnaires attacked an IWW hall; several IWW members were arrested; one was dragged from jail and murdered by a mob.
- 1919 general strike in Seattle: IWW united with AFL.
- Red Scare 1919–1920: 1919 Palmer Raids went after subversives (including Socialists, Communists, anarchists, IWW, Union of Russian Workers).
- Antiunion campaign in early 1920s:
 - Employers associated unions with communism and disloyalty.
 - Used yellow-dog contracts.
 - “The American plan” backed by National Association of Manufacturers, Chamber of Commerce; pushed open shop.
 - Company unions (U.S. Steel, International Harvester).
 - “Welfare capitalism” used by businesses to defuse unions (International Harvester, Ford, General Electric, Bethlehem Steel); provided benefit plans, recreational facilities, sometimes profit-sharing.
 - Total union membership dropped to 3.5 million in 1926.
- IWW declined after 1924 due to continued government suppression and internal divisions.