

# Labor Pains: The Labor Movement in the United States

**SUBMITTED BY:** Lee Jackson

**SUBJECT(S):** Management

**GRADE LEVEL(S):** 9, 10, 11, 12

## ≡ OVERVIEW:

By engaging in this inquiry-based activity, students will a) have a deeper understanding of the early organized labor movement in the United States; b) identify possible causes of union unrest; c) use primary sources to understand context and history.

## ≡ NBEA STANDARD(S):

- Management, VII. Organized Labor

## ≡ WHARTON GLOBAL YOUTH PROGRAM ARTICLE:

- [“A Conversation on Trade and Manufacturing”](#)

## Common Core Standard(s):

- Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.
- Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

**Objectives:** Following this lesson, students will be able to describe the role of organized labor and its influence on government and business.

**Knowledge@Wharton Article:** “[Union Leaders vs. Republican Legislators: What’s at Stake in the Standoff](#)”

**Other Resources/Materials:**

- [Labor Union chart](#)
- [Primary sources](#) (original documents from the original American labor unions)

**Activity 1:**

1. Read and discuss the article with the students. (10 mins)
2. Key takeaways from the article. (5 mins)

Legislators have historically attempted to restrict union bargaining power – *in effect, taking away a union’s right to negotiate over salary, seniority, pensions, health care and other work-related issues*. Thus, who we vote for may impact our job satisfaction and benefits. Most Americans are opposed to cutting collective bargaining rights, so this is a major issue.

3. Share key terms and clarify questions. (5 mins)

- **Labor Union** – An organized association of workers, often in a trade or profession, formed to protect and further their rights and interests.
- **Knights of Labor** – First important [national](#) labor organization in the U.S. Founded in 1869 by [Uriah Smith Stephens](#) as the Noble Order of the Knights of Labor, it included both skilled and unskilled workers, and it proposed a system of workers’ cooperatives to replace [capitalism](#). To protect its members from employers’ reprisals, it originally maintained secrecy. Under [Terence V. Powderly](#) (1879 – 1893), it favored open [arbitration](#) with management and discouraged strikes. National membership reached 700,000 in 1886. Strikes by militant groups and the [Haymarket Riot](#) caused an anti-union reaction that rapidly reduced the organization’s influence. A splinter group left to form the AFL (later [AFL-CIO](#)).
- **American Federation of Labor** – One of the first federations of [labor unions in the United States](#). It was founded in 1886 by an alliance of [craft unions](#) disaffected from the [Knights of Labor](#), a national labor association.

- **Industrial Workers of the World** – Also known as the IWW, or the Wobblies, this is a radical labor union that had its beginnings in Chicago in 1905.
- **Organized labor union** – An association of workers united as a single, representative entity for the purpose of improving the workers’ economic status and working conditions through collective bargaining with employers.
- **Collective bargaining:** A process of negotiations between employers and the representatives of a unit of employees aimed at reaching agreements that regulate working conditions.
- **Vertical Union** – This is a labor union that admits all workers in a given industry irrespective of their craft.
- **Horizontal Union:** This union includes all workers in a particular craft or skill throughout an industry, region or country.

**Tying it All Together:** (10 mins)

Share with students: American workers sought better working conditions, higher wages and reasonable hours. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, workers created three major groups to help them reach these goals. These groups were called labor unions, and were named: Knights of Labor, Industrial Workers of the World, and the American Federation of Labor.

Created at the height of the American Industrial Revolution, these groups were formed to counter the conditions imposed on them by major corporations. Today’s labor unions similarly seek to protect the rights of workers by using the influence of groups to encourage change through collective bargaining. Nearly every industry has some type of union.

**Activity 2:**

1. *Reading (20 mins):* Have students read the original documents from the American labor unions. Then, have students analyze the goals, possible concerns and mission of each using the accompanying labor union chart.

2. *Discussion (5 mins):* How are these principles applicable in business today?

Possible Answer: Like the Knights of Labor, labor unions are organized on local and national levels, usually by industry or trade. The primary function of a labor union is to partake in collective bargaining, the negotiation process over the terms of employment between a union and management. Union officials use this procedure to determine the wages for workers of a particular industry and to settle other worker-related issues, such as health benefits, overtime compensation and company policy and direction. Employee associations that use collective

bargaining procedures have become a popular type of labor union among white-collar professionals and other workers who have shunned traditional unions. Additionally, new kinds of union membership have been offered to workers who would like to be affiliated with a union but do not work in a union shop. These workers can become associate union members or join workplace organizations.

**Practice Outside of the Classroom:** Have students investigate labor unions in their area.

**What Worked and What I Would Do Differently:** The primary sources are challenging documents to read. I would pair students based on reading levels (high reader with a low reader) so that students can discuss and ensure comprehension for both. I also ended up taking a bit of time to check comprehension of both documents, asking students to pull out the most important points.

**Sources:**

- <http://www.answers.com/topic/knights-of-labor> – ixzz1SehHfHY7
- <http://business.highbeam.com/>

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