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Labor Unions

Long ago, working in a factory was not easy. The hours were long and the pay was very low. Workers wanted better working conditions. They began to join together and form labor unions.

The Noble Order of the Knights of Labor was started in 1869. At first, only skilled workers were invited to join. The meetings were held in secret. Workers were fired if it was found out that they joined a union. The Knights had many goals. The union wanted to end child labor, have a shorter workday, and equal pay for men and women. These were big goals for the time period.

In 1879, Terence Powderly was elected president of the Knights of Labor. He wanted more members in the union. He said that anyone could join. It didn't matter if the workers were skilled or unskilled, men or women. Even African Americans were invited to join. Members included everyone from factory workers to farmers.



The leaders of the union did not want to use strikes to achieve their goals. They thought that using rallies and meetings to win support was better. Members did not always agree with not using strikes. In 1885, some members of the Knights went on strike against a railroad. The railroad was forced to restore some pay cuts that it had made. Workers thought that this was a victory for the union. Membership went up to more than 700,000 people. But it did not last. The next year there was another strike. This time the strike turned violent. The country turned against labor unions, and the Knights lost many of their members.

In 1886, another union was started. Samuel Gompers led it. The American Federation of Labor, or AFL, had different goals from the Knights. This group only wanted to organize skilled workers. These workers were in smaller unions. Each smaller union was for a certain job or craft. African Americans were allowed to join the union, but most did not. Members of the smaller local unions found ways to keep them from joining. Women were not welcome, either. The AFL felt that working women were one of the causes of low wages.

The AFL wanted higher wages, shorter hours, and better working conditions. It also fought for the right of unions to negotiate for all workers at once. Workers who bargained as a group had more power than an individual worker. The AFL grew to be one of the most powerful unions in the nation. By 1910, more than one and a half million workers had joined the union.

Employers did not like unions. They were afraid of them. Employers wanted to deal with workers one at a time rather than as a large group. They did what they could to stop the unions. Employers tried to stop unions from meeting. Workers who tried to start unions or get other workers to join one were fired. New employees were forced to sign contracts that said they would not join a union. Employers refused to bargain with unions. Companies also

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hired replacements for striking workers. Despite all these measures, workers continued to join unions. However, business leaders continued to do everything they could to fight them. The struggle for unions to be recognized as legal groups went on for another thirty years.

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Questions

_____ 1. Which group allowed women to join?

- A. The AFL
- B. The Knights of Labor

_____ 2. Why didn't the AFL want women to join?

- A. The AFL blamed women for low wages.
- B. Too few women wanted to join.
- C. The AFL thought that women should stay home.

_____ 3. Who led the Knights of Labor?

- A. Samuel Gompers
- B. Abraham Lincoln
- C. Terence Powderly

4. Name two methods employers used to stop labor unions.

5. African Americans were more likely to join which union?

_____ 6. When bargaining for better working conditions, which group had more power?

- A. women
- B. individual workers
- C. a large group of workers

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How many of these can you write about? Think! Write! Check all the ones you answered.

Would you have risked getting fired to join a union? Why or why not?

Do you agree with the idea that women were the cause of low wages? Explain your answer.

Multiple horizontal lines for writing answers.