

Tactics of Strikers During the Guided Age

IB 20th Century History HL Internal Assessment

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Section 1: Identification and Evaluation of Sources

This investigation will focus on the Gilded Age in the United States (1873-1900) and will answer the question, “What aspects of different striking strategies during the Gilded Age and which were the most effective in completing their goals?” I will examine different labor movements around the country during the Gilded Age, their respective strategies when striking, and analyze the results with respect to their successes and shortcomings. Online articles and books written by experts on labor history in the United States, as well as various primary sources. will be utilized in my investigation.

Evaluation of source one

The first source I will examine is *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics, 1863-1923*. This source was written in 1994 by Dr. Eric Arnesen, a Professor of History at George Washington University who specializes in labor history in the United States; his credentials are extensive, and he has not shared his political beliefs publicly, which makes it more likely that his political biases are less represented in this paper. This book was written to

showcase the influential labor movements in New Orleans, which are many times overlooked in comparison to the Anthracite Coal Strike or the Homestead Strike. I thought that the information in this book would be an interesting addition to my own essay because of its focus on such an unknown but influential front for labor gains; however, a limitation to the purpose is that because these strikes are not as agreed upon with regard to their importance, some historians may read the evidence I used from this book as inconsequential. The content of this book is a detailed description of various disputes between workers and management in New Orleans with a focus on how both black and white workers cooperated in order to achieve their goals of better working conditions, hours, and pay. This subject matter is valuable for my essay because it shows some of the strategies that succeeded in this time period; however, because the focus of the book is so limited to New Orleans, viewpoints from other parts of the country are excluded.

Evaluation of source two

The second source I will examine is Chapter 3 from the United States' Department of Labor's series on labor history. This article was written by David Montgomery, who was a Professor of History from the University of Pittsburgh who also specializes in labor history; his work is valuable because he is qualified and experienced in the history of labor in the United

States. However, he was also a registered member of the Communist Party, USA, and the language and opinions that heavily favor strikers throughout the article are indicative of bias. This article was written for the Department of Labor about U.S. labor history; it is valuable to my topic because it shares much of the same purpose my essay has with respect to which strategies in labor strikes worked the best. However, it is limited in the fact that it does not provide many counterexamples, most likely due to Montgomery wanting to promote the exclusiveness of his Communist beliefs. This article is an extensive, comprehensive guide to labor history during the Gilded Age that provides detailed analysis and useful primary sources. Though this document is valuable because of these factors, Montgomery's very present bias does impair the overall quality.

Section 2: Investigation

Introduction

The Gilded Age in the United States set the stage for labor movements across the nation; however, because they had different strategies, each had varying degrees of success. In my investigation, I will consider the different strategies used by groups with similar goals and evaluate which resulted in the most success in accomplishing their goals; I will also explain why these methods worked and others did not.

Increase in the frequency of labor movements during the Gilded Age

From 1873 to 1905, the United States experienced a large uptick in the frequency of labor strikes. There are many factors that explain this increase. According to David Montgomery, the average workday for a factory worker was anywhere from 10 to 12 hours ¹; over time, these long periods of demanding labor took a heavy toll on the workers' physical and mental state. Another condition that prompted strikes was the involvement of women and children in the workforce; Montgomery states that a large group of industrial workers had to rely on the contributions of their family members just to maintain the basic "\$500" that paid for basic expenses ². A third factor that played a part in the increase in strike frequency during this time were the dangerous working conditions. Montgomery states that because of competition between factories, companies tried to reduce costs as much as possible, resulting in sweatshop-like conditions ³. After these conditions had been felt by workers across the nation, many decided to form groups and act, each with its own ideas on how to enact change. These differences resulted in various degrees of success.

¹ "U.S. Department of Labor," Chapter 3: Labor in the Industrial Era By David Montgomery, accessed October 31, 2018, <https://www.dol.gov/general/aboutdol/history/chapter3>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

The Pullman Strike

When George Pullman of the Pullman train car factory decided to increase the cost of living in his town without increasing wage levels, employees' paychecks dwindled down to almost nothing⁴. Once they were approved to strike by the American Railway Union, workers in the factory and across the nation stopped the movement of all trains carrying Pullman train cars, causing tens of millions of dollars in damage in the process.

Allying with a national organization like the American Railway Union was a strong start to the strike, as the ARU immediately brought the resources of a national organization, "the organizing skills of George Howard (a successful labor leader)," and the "powerful orator Eugene Debs."⁵ However, by allying themselves with such a large organization, the strikers became overconfident in the process; after much discussion, "Strike Committee...voted to arbitrate not only the rents but at any point" and as well as calling for "a nationwide sympathy strike of

⁴ Melvin I. Urofsky, "Pullman Strike," Encyclopædia Britannica, September 26, 2018, accessed October 31, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Pullman-Strike>.

⁵ Knight, Louise W. "Citizen." *University of Chicago Press*, www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/446999.html.

Pullman cars.⁶” However, asking for too much in negotiation and intervening with the essential transportation industry service proved to be the strikers’ downfall. Some citizens might have been sympathetic to the movement in the beginning, but mounting shipping delays caused federal action to be demanded; this came in the form of “hiring 400 unemployed men, deputiz[ing] them as U.S. Marshals, and arm[ing] them” to protect the safe transport of Pullman train cars⁷. While the workers started strong with the support of the ARU, the disruption of product transportation around the country and over-ambitious negotiations turned public opinion against them and eventually caused their downfall.

The Homestead Strike of 1892

This strike erupted when the arbitrator of the wage discussions brought forth a large wage decrease to workers in the Homestead mill, despite the increased success of the steel industry. Outraged, the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers (AA) and the Knights of

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

Labor accepted the strikers' request for assistance ⁸. After violence erupted between union men and strikebreakers and an assassination attempt was made on a factory official, public opinion had turned sharply away from the strikers and federal action was demanded ⁹.

Like the Pullman strike, the workers' tactic of gaining the support of the nationally supported Amalgamated Association of Steel and Iron Workers and the Knights of Labor was a strong start. However, this benefit was somewhat diminished with the start of violence, specifically

“guarding every avenue to the works; stopping all who may, or try, to get in the works

¹⁰.” These already negative thoughts about the labor movement were only exacerbated when

Homestead workers clashed with Pinkerton detectives, and that “the firing was begun by the

strikers,” as Henry Frick recounts ¹¹. However, this source is limited as he led the strikebreakers

and wanted to make his side look innocent in his account. Despite the fact that the Pinkertons

were coming to break the strike through force, the violent retaliation of the strikers corroborated

⁸ “Resources on the 1892 Homestead Steel Strike @ Pitt Archives: Carnegie Steel & Pinkertons.” *LibGuides*, pitt.libguides.com/c.php?g=12523&p=66317.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

the negative view of the workers' movement. Some may argue that the fall of the Homestead strike was not by any fault of their strategy but instead caused by the negative press of an attempted assassination of Henry Frick by an unrelated third party. However, the movement already had such poor public view from previous violence like the street patrols and clash with the Pinkertons that this only catalyzed the demise of the Homestead strike. Overall, the strategy utilized in this strike was too violent for the masses, and the poor public perception that the workers' violence caused eventually influenced the federal government to intervene on the factory's behalf.

The New Orleans Waterfront

The New Orleans Waterfront strikes proved to be much more successful than the other movements. At the waterfront in 1907, workers were suddenly presented with daily quotas that were almost impossible, especially for screwmen (highly skilled dockworkers who loaded bales of cotton into steamboats); after refusing to comply with the high demands, all screwmen were

locked out of the waterfront ¹². After three weeks of intense pressure from the unions and negotiations between workers and bosses, a compromise was reached and general dockworkers and screwmen returned to work.

This labor movement was more successful than the Pullman Strike and the Homestead Strike because instead of looking for support from a national labor group, they found support within their own community. As Eric Arneson, an expert in the labor movements of New Orleans dock workers, said, "white workers reasoned accurately that success lay in reducing all possible divisions between black and white workers and preventing a revival of a split labor market on the docks. ¹³" The strong bonds made between blacks and whites were an extremely effective tactic, as once these ties were established, the labor community stood as one against the dock bosses; without this alliance, the splintering of groups would not have enough collective power to successfully negotiate. Another important aspect of the strikers' strategy was nonviolence: by not retaliating to the provocateurs, the dockworkers did not give waterfront owners an excuse to

¹² "New Orleans Dockworkers," Google Books, accessed October 31, 2018, https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=_yYo_Zjj52gC&oi=fnd&pg=PR9&ots=pEI_694kqU&sig=ObTN4WPOFvmi8fiPeIn7BR8XNqY#v=onepage&q&f=false.

¹³ Eric Arneson, "Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics, 1863-1923," UI Press | Eric Arneson | Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics, 1863-1923, accessed October 31, 2018, <https://www.press.uillinois.edu/books/catalog/87fkm6ed9780252063770.html>.

give them a negative reputation as violent people; if they had been violent instead, negative press would have ruined the strike's reputation ¹⁴. Through biracial unity and good public opinion of non-violence, New Orleans dockworkers achieved their goals better than strikes with national support.

While some historians like David Montgomery argue that aligning with national organizations is the best choice first choice for aspiring labor movements, the tactics of interracial community power and nonviolence have shown to be more effective in achieving the strikers' demands than the overly ambitious movements that sought to gain the support of the entire country.

Conclusion

Through this investigation, I have found that while tactics like violence, unwillingness to compromise, and disruption of essential industries did not work well for strikers, widespread community solidarity, ability to negotiate, and nonviolence were the most effective tactics to use when trying to accomplish labor goals in the Gilded Age.

¹⁴ Rosenberg, Daniel. "New Orleans Dockworkers." *Google Books*, books.google.com/books/about/New_Orleans_Dockworkers.html?id=_yYo_Zjj52gC.

Section 3: Reflection

Through this investigation, I experienced some of the difficulties that historians can face while researching a topic. The first task I did was research labor conflicts in the Gilded Age, and I found many different movements with characteristic qualities about their striking strategy that ultimately impacted their success. However, because of the constraint of a word count on the essay, my analysis was limited to three perspectives. Also, many of the sources that I chose were very detailed and well-analyzed; however, because of the sources' thoroughness, they were very dense. It was sometimes difficult to sift through all of the information and find the most valuable parts, something that most historians writing research papers with a plethora of information face.

Another limitation of my investigation was that it was difficult (and in some cases impossible) to find sources on the internet with the raw data that would support my arguments through statistical evidence. Many of the sources I found were heavily focused on the analysis of the events I researched; while these were useful for forming my own opinions of strike strategies, they did not give me the evidence I needed to corroborate my claims. With the choice to discriminate between sources came my own selection bias. I tried to remedy this by using the

point of view of David Montgomery, a historian who somewhat opposes my argument by saying that the Pullman strike was actually more successful than most give it credit and that national support is the most important tactic. Also, many sources included opinions of historians on strikers' justifications, and it took lots of time to find historians who had information and perspectives that concerned the successful tactics used by strikers in the Gilded Age.

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