

Yet American labor emerged from World War II with the main sectors of the industrial economy organized, with greater earning potential than any previous generation of American workers, and with unprecedented power as an organized interest group that could appeal to the federal government to promote its welfare. Though American workers as a whole had made no grand challenge to the nation's basic corporate-centered political economy in the preceding four and one-half decades, they entered the postwar world with a greater level of power, and a bigger share in the proceeds of a booming economy, than anyone could have imagined in 1896. The labor and working-class history of the United States between 1900 and 1945, then, is the story of how working-class individuals, families, and communities—members of an extremely diverse American working class—managed to carve out positions of political, economic, and cultural influence, even as they remained divided among themselves, dependent upon corporate power, and increasingly invested in a individualistic, competitive, acquisitive culture.

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## Workers and the Rise of Corporate America

American trade unionists entered the 20th century battered by a series of savage defeats which, by 1896, brought the end of an era when millions of Americans had joined mass movements seeking alternatives to corporate-dominated, wage-labor capitalism. Labor reformers' post-Civil War dream of emancipating American laborers from the wage system and their hopes for the creation of a producers' republic based on principles of cooperation and commonwealth had been shattered in Chicago's Haymarket Square on May 4, 1886. The wind had been stolen from the spirit of unionism in the all-important steel industry at Andrew Carnegie's Homestead mill in 1892, and from industrial unionism on the nation's rail lines in the defeat of the 1894 Pullman strike and boycott. Finally, the Republican Party's defeat of the Populist-Democrat fusion in the presidential campaign in 1896 ensured that the vast majority of wage workers and farmers would not have the support of their own national political party.

Ascendant corporate leaders had been emboldened and empowered by much of the public's revulsion against the labor-related violence of the late 19th century. The forces of "law and order" at the local, state, and federal levels came to the aid of business in strikes and lockouts during the "Age of Industrial Conflict." Business also won the crucial legal conflict over the definition of "freedom" in the workplace and in employment markets. Court injunctions against labor activity were ubiquitous in the wake of the 1894 Pullman boycott, and case law privileged employers' prerogatives at all turns. In the eyes of the law, Americans generally—with the exception of married white women—had a responsibility to work, but their sole right at work was the right to quit. Furthermore, legislators paid less attention to workers' welfare than they did to subsidizing the growth of American industry or sustaining their own political power, all too often lining their pockets with the graft that ran rampant in that period of fantastic growth. Lawmakers had taken the first steps toward regulating trusts and moderating the worst forms of corruption, but those efforts were generally weak, and the nation's courts ensured that employers' power in the workplace would be virtually unchecked.

Great changes were taking place, yet Americans generally believed that even more change was needed if the republic were to survive and thrive in the industrial era. In the workplace as much as in surrounding communities, Americans