

Many, though hardly all, employers had initially accepted the rise of the AFL, even going as far as voluntarily recognizing unions and forming the National Civic Federation, a coalition of labor and business leaders seeking cooperation in the economy. By 1904, however, employers had grown frustrated with the demands of union contracts and workers' increased militancy, and they began to hit back. They increased the use of "yellow dog contracts" to force workers to sign agreements that promised they would not join a union. Employers divided workers by national origin and regularly employed strikebreaking replacement workers. The National Association of Manufacturers embarked on a concerted "open shop" drive; the forerunner of today's "right-to-work" laws, these were campaigns by employers and their political allies to ensure that workers in a unionized shop did not have to belong to the union. This protection of workers' right to contract as individuals amounted to a thinly veiled attempt to undermine all organized labor, as unions could not afford to represent workers who were "free riders" on the backs of their union member coworkers. In 1913, the open-shop drive climaxed in an actual labor war in the Colorado coal fields, as the Rockefeller-owned Colorado Fuel and Iron Company pushed for ever greater production and at one point destroyed a workers' camp in Ludlow, Colorado, killing eleven children and two women in the attack (see Figure 1).⁹



[Click to view larger](#)

Figure 1. "Slain Miner and One of His Fighting Comrades."

Photo by Bain News Service, Forbes Camp, Ludlow, Colorado, May 3, 1914. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress (LC-B2-3034-14), digital ID: LC-DIG-ggbain-15854.

As a result of such attacks on organized labor, membership in unions actually dropped in 1905 and remained stagnant for the next five years. Yet the booming economy before and during World War I increased labor's power: the AFL's membership increased by approximately 800,000 between 1910 and 1917, and organized labor as a whole grew to 4 million by 1920.¹⁰ The membership also became increasingly diverse in terms of skill level and occupations. These were important gains for workers, but they remained limited in no small part by the failure of the AFL to imagine an alliance with the vast majority of unorganized workers.

Radical Alternatives in the Progressive Era