

For African Americans, the war sparked a major demographic, economic, and political transition. Between 1915 and 1918, nearly 500,000 African Americans migrated from the South to northern cities, with another 700,000 following in their wake during the 1920s. The Great Migration, as this movement of black southerners to industrial cities has been called, began a process that not only transformed the lives of the migrants but also fundamentally changed the populations and politics of major American cities.<sup>20</sup> World War I-era migrants built modern black urban communities in places like New York’s Harlem, Chicago’s South Side, and Detroit’s Black Bottom. Out of these communities would grow civil rights organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, black nationalist organizations like Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association, and the first major black labor radicals and trade unions. In the 1920s, Harlem was especially fertile ground for black working-class politics. As African American artists and writers created the Harlem Renaissance, black socialists and communists spoke on soapboxes on New York City’s streetcorners and helped popularize a black class politics. Building on the longstanding activism of Hubert Harrison and others, people like A. Philip Randolph who got their start in the 1910s would help build a nationally powerful, labor-based civil rights movement in the 1930s and 1940s.

## The Business Decade

World War I seemed to offer an opportunity for workers to improve their position in the economy. Workers, in fact, gained a great deal in real wages and political power during the brief period of nearly full employment during the war. Yet unions’ efforts to institutionalize their place in an “industrial democracy” were roundly defeated in a series of strikes between 1919 and 1921. In 1919, alone, more than 4 million workers—approximately one-fifth of the workforce—went on strike. A general strike of 60,000 in Seattle, Washington, a strike by nearly the entire police force in Boston, Massachusetts, and a national steel strike of 350,000 workers in Pittsburgh and beyond (Figure 6) are representative of the broad scope of the strikes by workers fearful that they would lose what they had won during the war and facing the prospect of a severe postwar recession. In each case, the workers lost, and they ended up more divided than before, and more desperate for jobs at virtually any wage. Moreover, the entrenched economic conservatism of the federal government and popular culture not only marginalized labor unions but also celebrated the spirit of innovation, speculation, and acquisitive individualism of the “business decade.”



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