# The Industrial Revolution: Goals, Accomplishments, and Failures of Organized Labor

The industrial revolution is prominent for the rapid growth and expansion that catapulted America into a modern era. Immigration in the late 19th and early 20th centuries brought with it significant population growth and a subsequent increase in the American industrial workforce. However, sometimes industry bosses took advantage of this new workforce and working conditions were not always ideal. With big business making profits at the expense of workers, there was bound to be discontentment among workers. This instigated the rise of the organized labor movement; a period in which workers came together to form associations such as the National Labor Union, the Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor, and the Order of the Knights of St. Crispin. These associations, known as labor unions purported to fight for the improvement of working conditions and economic positions of workers. This essay is a study on some of organized labor’s major goals, accomplishments, and failures. The essay also explicates why it was difficult for labor unions to survive.

## Goals of Organized Labor

The industrial revolution came during a period when America had a significant increase in population. With industries in need of workers and a huge workforce thankful for any type of paid labor, employers took advantage of workers. Some managers cut their workers’ wages while others shifted part of their business costs to workers. For instance, in the textile industry, clothing manufacturers often asked employees to buy their own needles, thread and even sewing machines (Rosenzweig et al. 39).

Overall, the working conditions and the economic positions of workers were wanting, often characterized by lack of job security, low wages, and long working hours; typically, “10-hour working days, six days a week” (Rosenzweig et al. 39). People also suffered through unsafe working environments. Railroad workers “ran along the tops of trains to set brakes for each car or stood on the tracks to drop a coupling pin as the cars crashed together” (Rosenzweig et al. 41). In the year 1881, approximately 30,000 of these workers were either injured or killed because railroad managers considered brakes costlier than trainmen (Rosenzweig et al. 41). Female workers also faced hardships such as sexual abuse and exploitation from their employers (Rosenzweig et al. 39).

Feeling oppressed by how industry bosses ran their businesses, workers felt the need to “set a limit on the system’s unbridled economic power and… assert workers’ right to an equitable share of the economic bounty they helped to produce” (Rosenzweig et al. 19). These workers started to unionize to help develop a balance of power between employers and workers. Brought together by their shared cultural, religious, ethnic or political values, they expressed solidarity in asserting their rights, campaigning for higher wages, and protesting poor working conditions (Rosenzweig et al. 77, 91). Unions also aimed at pushing for the abolition of child labor. Examples of labor movements which came up during this period included the Order of the Knights of St. Crispin, The Knights of Labor, and the National Labor Union.

## Accomplishments and Failures of Organized Labor

Organized labor had a positive impact on the American labor force. Some of these effects can still be felt in today’s society. Labor unions in the Industrial Revolution set the foundation for issues such as minimum wage, working hours and living wage standards. One notable achievement of labor movements included negotiation of better working hours. In 1884, the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions began campaigning for shorter workdays. The association organized over 1500 strikes within the period of one year. In the end, most workers got their working hours reduced; some acquired 8-hour workdays (Rosenzweig et al. 101). Organized labor also helped in achieving safer working environments, and compensation for workplace injuries among others. As well, unions negotiated for higher wages. For instance, Union Leagues created by black southerners called for strikes to demand fairer employment contracts and higher wages (Rosenzweig et al. 9). The Knights of Labor also negotiated for higher pay (Rosenzweig et al. 77).

Notably, labor unions also helped abolish child labor. According to Rosenzweig et al. (39), millions of working-class families depended on child labor. Southern mills largely employed child labor with children making up close to 5% of cotton mill workers in Massachusetts and 25% of cotton mill workers in North Carolina in 1896 (Rosenzweig et al. 51). Children worked for close to 12 hours a day in poor-paying jobs in the textile, tobacco-processing and printing industries. They also worked as newsboys and bootblacks. Despite some states enforcing laws prohibiting child labor, these laws were easily ignored by the underprivileged parents or by materialistic employers hankering for cheap labor. However, by 1876, approximately half of the children in the south were enrolled in school (Rosenzweig et al. 10).

Workers faced job insecurity many of them often losing their jobs during bad economic times. Unions were able to secure insurance for workers who lost their jobs. As well, “The courts repeatedly denied damages to injured workers, maintaining that the workers shared the blame for accidents and that by going to work, they accepted the risks of the job” (Rosenzweig et al. 41). Labor unions aided the creation of safer working environments and also helped to get worker compensation for injuries suffered at work. Other achievements included the passing of establishment of the minimum wage, pension, and health insurance plans.

However, while unions were quite adept at addressing the needs of workers, organized labor also encountered several pitfalls. Despite the agreement of workers about oppressive working conditions, unions faced opposition from wealthy corporations. As well, the racial and ethnic tension was still very much alive among workers. These tensions divided the workforce. Although workers from different ethnic backgrounds “embraced the ideal of collectivity and the power of mutual rather than individual action to blunt the devastating impact of industrial capitalism on their work, family life, and communities […], they were often divided along lines of race, gender, ethnicity, religion, and region.” (Rosenzweig et al. 24). Apart from the many lives lost during the labor movement, this discordance also led to the eventual failure of organized labor.

## Why It Was Difficult for Labor Unions to Survive

Unions called for strikes and protests on the premise that the factories and industries would fall short of labor and agree to the unions’ demands. However, immigration brought more foreign workers to America. These workers were willing to work irrespective of the low pay and working conditions. As such, managers and industry bosses. With no worker shortage, the bargaining power of labor unions grew weaker and some of them faded away.

Discordance within the unions themselves also threatened their survival. For instance, towards the decline of the Knights of Labor, the union was blemished with bad decisions, internal disagreements, and disunity of purpose (Rosenzweig et al. 104). The Knights organized several strikes and protests which failed and hence began their decline as they could no longer protect the interests of the union members. Markedly, in May 1886, 11 people were killed in the Haymarket Square riot in a Knights-organized protest advocating for 8-hour working days. This ordeal dealt a lethal blow to the union with many people associating the group with violence and anarchism. In the wake of this riot, the union’s membership dropped from 0.75 million members in 1886 to approximately 0.1 million members by 1890 (Rosenzweig et al. 106). Most of these members joined the AFL (American Federation of Labor). Unions also faced opposition from other unions. For instance, the AFL and the Knights of Labor often clashed and invaded each other’s territories disrupting the strikes and protests. Eventually, the AFL overpowered the Knights and saw the decline of the union (Rosenzweig et al. 112).

In conclusion, the Industrial Revolution is a remarkable period in history. The availability of working opportunities and an overabundance of workers to fill them resulted in a less than ideal working environment characterized by an imbalance between the employees and the industry. Industry bosses took advantage of the abundance of workers to maximize profits at the expense of unskilled workers. However, workers became increasingly empowered to recognize the oppression and hence formed associations to protest these oppressive working conditions and low wages. This led to a meticulous labor movement in which workers fought for their rights and greatly improved the working conditions of the American workforce. Some of the effects of organized labor in the industrial revolution that are still present today include minimal wage, health insurance for employees, compensation for workplace injuries, and the end of child labor. Today, labor unions are not the formidable force they once were. Given that the positive impacts of labor unions outweigh the cons, it is necessary to revive these associations to give power back to the American workforce.

**Works Cited**

Rosenzweig, Roy et al. *Who Built America? Working People and The Nation's History, Vol. 2: Since 1877*. 3rd ed. Boston, MA.: Bedford/ St. Martin's, 2007. Print.