

1763-1789

Overview

In the colonies' struggle for independence, workers and their interests played an important role in the success of the revolutionary movement. One example most people are aware of is the Boston Massacre. This event had roots in the unhappiness of Boston ropemakers over competition from off duty British soldiers who sought casual work to supplement their wages. What began as a verbal confrontation between one ropemaker and a soldier moved to a confrontation between workers and sentries and then ended as a battle cry for the revolution. Further evidence of the importance of common people in the movement is the success of Thomas Paine's 1776 pamphlet, *Common Sense*, which was written for the masses and not the upper class. The tremendous sales (over 150,000 and three printings) indicate the level of interest the average person had in the emerging ideology of independence. During this period people continued to work and there were instances of workers uniting to better their condition. The involvement of the worker and the common person truly made this more than a rebellion into a revolution.

Labor Related Issues of the Period

- Support of Adam Smith's free trade ideology grew. Workers used this to fight wartime monopolies and price controls.
- Most soldiers were commoners, eg. farmers, slaves, apprentices, laborers, fishermen, artisans and women
- Growth of political organization and action.
- Ideally the Revolution creates a government and society based on equality of free men.
- In reality the Revolution maintains an elitist system that favors the educated upper class.
- Slavery deliberately not addressed by the Declaration of Independence.
- Slavery continued as an institution.

Labor Related Events of the Period

1770 Boston Massacre precipitated by conflict between ropeworkers and British soldier.

1773 Carpenters dressed as Mohawk Indians help lead the Boston Tea Party.

1775 United Company of Philadelphia for Promoting American Manufacturing employs 400 women under one roof. Points toward future industrialization.

1776 *Common Sense* published throughout colonies.
Colonial delegates sign Declaration of Independence in Carpenter's Hall built by Carpenter's Company of Philadelphia.
The Wealth of Nations published which promotes laissez-faire economics, individualism yet opposes monopolies and mercantilism.

- 1777 British defeated at Saratoga saves New England from British.
- 1778 New York City journeyman printers unite and gain increase in wages. They then disband.
- 1781 Their defeat at Yorktown by Washington's army proves to British they cannot win.
- 1783 Treaty of Paris signed. England recognizes American independence.
- 1785 New York City shoemakers strike for three weeks.
- 1786 Printers in Philadelphia walk out to protest a wage reduction. Result: Gained a \$6 a week minimum wage.
- 1787 Constitution counts five slaves as three people for Congressional representation.

Important Concepts

free trade, independence, laissez faire, monopoly, strike, minimum wage, capitalism, equality (1776 version)