

1850-1877

Overview

The "peculiar institution" of slavery was obviously a major cause of the Civil War. Yet, it was not solely a moral issue. Northern workers did not want to compete against slave labor. How could they? As Northern workers sought to increase their share of the wealth, their brethren workers in the South labored without compensation. Northern labor leaders and industrialists thought the South was trying to destroy capitalism and spread its slave power aristocracy on the nation. Unfortunately there was no solution except war, but with the North's victory and passage of the 13th Amendment the "peculiar institution" of slavery was abolished. For blacks, the struggle was not over. A long road toward complete freedom was ahead, as it was for all workers.

Labor Related Issues of the Period

- Beginning of the dramatic growth in American industry, and population. Industry was especially spurred by the needs of war.
- Wartime labor organizing led to the formation of 12 national unions as labor is in high demand and can wield a voice.
- Slavery ended.
- Eight hour movement begins
- The depression which follows the Panic of 1873 hits industrial America harder than earlier depressions when the agrarian nature of America allowed more to provide for themselves.
- Trade unionism spread to the more skilled factory workers.

Labor Related Events of the Period

1850 US population is 23 million.

1852 The Typographical Union founded which is the first national workers organization to endure to the present day.

First state law limiting women's working day to ten hours passed in Ohio.

1859 Iron Molders Union formed in Philadelphia.

1860 Successful strike of 20,000 shoemakers in New England.

Abraham Lincoln, in support of New England shoemakers, says, "Thank God that we have a system of labor where there can be a strike."

1863 Emancipation Proclamation issued by Lincoln which frees slaves in southern areas occupied by Union forces.

Working Women's Union founded.

The present-day Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers founded.

- 1864 Legality of importing immigrants by holding a portion of their wages or property is upheld in the Contract Labor Law. These immigrants were often used as strikebreakers. Though this law was repealed in 1868, the practice was not outlawed until the passage of the Foran Act in 1885.
- 1865 13th Amendment to the Constitution bans slavery in US.
Great Eight Hour League formed in Massachusetts.
- 1866 National Labor Union formed in Baltimore, MD.
- 1867 Knights of St. Crispin founded which was a union open to all factory workers in the shoe industry.
General strike of Chicago trade unions demanding an 8 hour day.
- 1868 First federal 8 hour day passed, only applies to laborers, mechanics, and workmen employed by the government.
First state labor bureau passed in Massachusetts.
- 1869 In Washington DC, the Black National Labor Union founded under the leadership of Isaak Myers.
First local of the Knights of Labor founded in Philadelphia, it maintained extreme secrecy. Membership is open to blacks and women.
First national female union is organized, Daughters of St. Crispin. They hold a convention in Lynn, Massachusetts and elect Carrie Wilson as president.
- 1870 First written contract between coal miners and coal mine operators signed.
Due to overcrowding and unsanitary conditions, infant mortality in New York is 65% higher than in 1810.
- 1873 Panic of 1873 followed by a depression wipes out most national unions.
- 1874 Union label first used by Cigar Makers International Union.
In New York City, police injured dozens of unemployed at a rally.
- 1876 Mollie Maguires convicted for coalfield murders in Pennsylvania. Ten later hanged.
The party which will become the Socialist Labor Party organized.
- 1877 National railroad strikes crippled the country. Federal troops needed to be called out as some state militias sided with strikers.

Important Concepts

Eight-hour movement, Emancipation, Mollie Maguires, 13th Amendment, 14th Amendment, 15th Amendment