INNOVATION AT WORK: FIGHTING FOR FAIR PAY AND SHORTER HOURS

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For many people, the word **innovation** conjures images of fancy new technologies that we celebrate for compressing time and space. Transportation technologies such as canals, railroads, trollies, automobiles, and airplanes served to connect an expanding republic. They are often remembered for tightening the bonds of interdependence among the several regions of the sprawling nation. Similarly, we often praise technological **changes** in work processes and industrial management, such as factory assembly lines, for lowering the cost of production and the final prices of goods, making it possible for ordinary people to benefit from greater buying power. Yet, for the workers at the heart of the American manufacturing economy for most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the **impact** of technological **innovation** has been more mixed.

New transportation and production technologies expanded markets and lowered costs, but they also increased competition, made many traditional skills obsolete, and pushed workers to develop new ways to fight the growing devaluation of their labor. Therefore, in order to study **innovation** in history, we must consider both the progress it brought and the challenges it created for workers.



Workers in a room of the David Cummings & Company shoe factory stood, each in front of his workbench, around a worktable strewn with cuttings for leather shoe uppers. The Cummings factory building on Norton Street in South Berwick, Maine, was constructed about 1872. By the late 1800s, the mill employed 350 men and women who manufactured nearly 5,000 pairs of shoes per day. The factory later operated as the South Berwick Shoe, Inc., and, finally, as the Duchess Shoe Company. It closed in the early 1990s. Old Berwick Historical Society (MMN #101751).

FROM APPRENTICES TO WORKERS: HOW LABORERS RESPONDED TO EARLY INDUSTRIAL CHANGE

Workers' organizations in the United States are as old as the nation itself. New ideas and attitudes about social equality that arose in the Revolutionary Era coincided with a decline in the apprenticeship system. Apprenticeships usually provided training for young boys to become business owners. When a journeyman apprentice had finally "mastered" his craft, usually in his early twenties, he became a "master craftsman," opened his own shop, and joined a guild of highly skilled tradespeople. Yet by the second decade of the nineteenth century, many apprentices found that their likelihood of becoming master craftsmen was disappearing. Workshops were expanding into factories. Journeymen could no longer count on receiving a sizable plot of land and a few suits of clothes at the conclusion of their indentures.

In response to these **changes**, some artisans—such as blacksmiths, carpenters, and mechanics—formed trade unions. These groups worked to protect the value of their skills and to demand better wages and working conditions. As factories grew, workers also began to ask bigger questions about fairness and independence. As they held rallies and circulated their ideas in newspapers, craftspeople pointed out that it was fundamentally workers' labor that produced the profits which enabled workshops to expand into factories.[1]

Because many political rights were limited to landowners, wage workers pushed for **change** beyond the workplace. Through trade unions and groups like the Workingmen's Parties, they called for reforms such as shorter workdays, debt relief, and expanded voting rights. Workers also argued that their labor helped create the wealth that allowed factories to grow. In 1829, the Workingmen's Party of New York called for lawmakers to "give to every human being an equal amount of property" from the public domain.[2] The short-lived Equal Rights Party (also known as the "Locofocos") pushed for free trade.[3] By organizing together, these workers responded to the challenges of industrial **change**, showing that **innovation** not only transformed how people worked, but also how they fought for their rights.



From a book titled *The Book of Trades; or Library of the Useful Arts* (1807) by Jacob Johnson, an illustration of a shoemaker cutting out the upper leather of a shoe and a journeyman joining the upper leather to the sole of a shoe. Library of Congress (92500396).

WORKERS ORGANIZE: BUILDING ALLIANCES IN THE GILDED AGE

The acceleration of industrial production during the Civil War also accelerated the growth of waged labor. More Americans began working for wages instead of owning their own farms or businesses. Investors built mines, factories, and railroads, and many farmers took wage jobs to earn extra income. While wages could be negotiated, workers often faced low pay and unstable conditions.

Between 1861 and 1877, workers across many industries—including miners, railroad workers, carpetweavers, furniture makers, and roof tilers—continued forming trade unions. These groups helped workers organize and demand better wages and safer working conditions. Some unions used strikes, refusing to work until employers agreed to their demands. In January 1861, coal miners in Belleville, Illinois, launched strikes to prevent reductions in the price per ton of coal and to avoid wage theft.[4] African American washerwomen in Jacksonville, Mississippi, united to collectively bargain for better rates. As the washerwomen

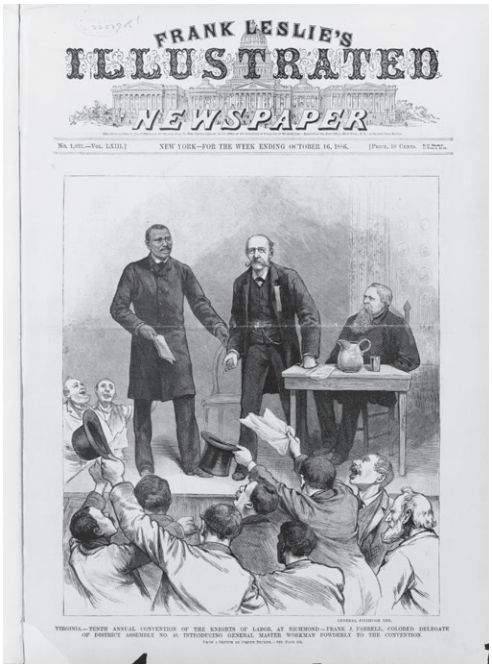
1 Sean Willentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (Oxford University Press, 1984); Mark Lause, *Long Road to Harper's Ferry: The Rise of the First American Left* (Pluto Press, 2018).
2 Sean Griffin, *The Root and the Branch: Working Class Reform and Anti-Slavery, 1790-1860* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2024), 62-64.
3 Griffin, *Root and Branch*, 73.
4 Rosemary Feurer, "Contesting the Insatiable Maw of Capital: Mine Workers' Struggles in the Civil War Era," *Civil War History*, 70:3 (2024): 17-42.

stated in their petition, "We do not wish in the least to charge exorbitant prices, but desire to be able to live comfortably if possible from the fruits of our labor."[5] So many workers demanded an eight-hour day as the fair condition for honest labor that President Ulysses Grant issued an executive order in 1868 that an eight-hour day was the legal length of the workday for all federal government workers and contractors.[6]

The Supreme Court ruled that neither an executive order nor a law passed by Congress had the power to limit the legal length of a workday in private industry.[7] By the late 1870s, laborers were widely celebrated in popular culture as the foundation of American prosperity, but the average length of the workday was closer to ten hours. Magazines like *Harper's Weekly* and *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* represented workers sympathetically as they struggled against the unchecked power of large business conglomerates. Both major political parties tried to court workers with their platform statements. While some read this celebration of workers more as lip service than real respect, union leaders used this opportunity to **innovate** new strategies to **change** the terms under which workers sold their labor.

As industrial growth continued in the late 1800s, many workers faced low wages, long hours, and unsafe conditions. In response, the Knights of Labor grew into one of the largest labor organizations in the country after the Great Railroad Strike of 1877. Unlike many earlier unions, the Knights welcomed all workers who earned their living through labor, including those in factories, railroads, farms, and mines. By the mid-1880s, the group had more than 700,000 members across the nation. With such a large network, the Knights began to push for broad **changes**. They called for government regulation of railroads, an end to child and convict labor, and an eight-hour workday. They also supported cooperative ownership of businesses and greater access to land for working people.[8]

In 1886, a rally demanding the eight-hour day in Chicago's Haymarket Square erupted in violence, leading to the public hanging of the rally's organizers and the decline of the Knights as a national mouthpiece for workers. At the state level, however, individual Knights continued to combine with populists and socialists to demand public ownership of city trolley systems, heating and electricity distributors, and municipal water. Through local unions, they hoped to not only negotiate for better wages and working conditions but also draw attention to the role of workers in producing value for cities and states through farms, ranches and industry.[9]



The cover of *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* from October 16, 1886, depicts Frank Farreel, a Black Knight, introducing Terence Powderly, the Grand Master of the Knights, at the local interracial assembly of the Knights of Labor in Richmond, Virginia. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division (LC-USZ62-120765).

While the Knights of Labor declined in national **influence** after the Haymarket Affair, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) emerged as a leader for uniting the interests of skilled craftspeople, particularly native-born and English-speaking immigrants in the urban North. The AFL championed the eight-hour day, opposed convict labor and child labor, pushed for better education for working people, and, above all else, united to protect the value of the artisanal skills required for manufacturing and construction.

When strikes during the Gilded Age often failed, workers looked for new ways to respond to the **changes** brought by industrial growth. They revived the idea of workingmen's parties to build a national alliance between farmers and laborers, hoping to gain more power through politics. Groups such as the Greenback Party, Greenback Labor Party, National Grange of the Order of Patrons of Husbandry, Farmers' Alliance, and the People's Party competed to shape this movement. Together, they pushed for **changes** to both working and business conditions. For example, the Omaha Platform called for shorter workdays, easier access to credit, graduated income taxes, and reforms to expand democracy. Although these parties won only a few elections, they

5 "First Collective Action of Black Women Workers," *Jackson Daily Clarion*, June 24, 1866, in *The Black Worker: A Documentary History from Colonial Times to the Present*, ed. Philip S. Foner and Ronald L. Lewis (Temple University Press, 1978-1984).
6 Edward McPherson, "President Grant's Order Respecting Wages of Labor, May 19, 1869," in *A Handbook of Politics for 1872* (Philip and Solomons, 1872), 70.
7 In *United States v. Martin* (1876), the Supreme Court held that the eight-hour directive did not override individual contracts for longer hours.
8 Henry George, *Progress and Poverty: An Inquiry into the Cause of Industrial Depressions, and of Increase of Want with Increase of Wealth* (Doubleday and McClure, 1879), 157-158.
9 Leon Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics* (University of Illinois Press, 1985).

influenced major political debates, showing how workers adapted to **innovation** by seeking **change** not just in the workplace, but in government as well.[10]

NEW IDEAS ABOUT EFFICIENCY CHALLENGE WORKERS

The rhythm of workers' lives, as well as the composition of the working classes, **changed** again in the early twentieth century. Employers who wanted to reduce their reliance on skilled craftspeople **innovated** new methods of industrial production that attempted to move completely away from skilled training outside the workplace. At the Ford Motor Company, for example, Henry Ford implemented ideas he learned from Frederick Winslow Taylor's *The Principles of Scientific Management* (1912) to make his factory less reliant upon the ingenuity of highly skilled machinists that commanded some of the highest wages among the working classes. Ford hired engineers to carefully observe and then subdivide the work of the machinists who built cars so that he could instead use an assembly line of semi-skilled workers, each assigned one small task. As Charlie Chaplin parodied this process in the film, *Modern Times* (1936), the work of a so-called "specialist" could be mind-numbingly boring.[11]



This illustration appeared in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* on December 31, 1887, and depicts a long line of African American families carrying bales of cotton in from the fields. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division (LC-USZ62-121658).

The rise of semi-skilled industrial jobs provided an opportunity for **innovative** union organizing. Factories quickly transitioned to large, diverse workplaces, filled with migrants from both the rural United States and overseas, with a particularly large group from Southern and Eastern Europe. Southern African Americans, who spent the previous several generations as sharecroppers and tenant farmers in the South, sought waged work in cities at an accelerating rate after 1900. A growing share of industrial workers were women and children, a fact that did not go unnoticed by middle-class women calling for social and legal equality. However, the men who led most trade unions—even the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union—were often reluctant to organize women and girls, who were expected to leave paid work after marriage. Many also refused to see young women seamstresses as equal to the male tailors who had founded the union. In 1909, young Yiddish- and Italian-speaking women garment workers in New York City joined with the Women's Trade Union League to organize a massive strike known as the Uprising of the 20,000. These immigrant women marched alongside middle-class allies to demand better pay, shorter hours, and safer working conditions, including bathroom breaks and factory inspections. Their partnership turned the strike into a broader fight for women's rights, including equal pay, access to education, and a stronger voice in unions and the law. The strike also showed that workers could organize across ethnic lines and across an entire industry.

As industrial production skyrocketed during the First World War, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) expanded organizing campaigns to reach more workers in semi-skilled jobs, particularly immigrants, women, and African Americans. The number of strikes increased every year between 1914 and 1919, and the new War Industries Board policy of guaranteed arbitration helped many unions win concessions, including higher wages, shorter workdays, and official recognition of unions.[12] At the close of the war, steel production was both one of the largest industries in the country and one that had profited most from lucrative government contracts. However, the close of the war also led employers to harass workers for continuing the practice of organizing union meetings.[13]

In 1919, after several years of organizing iron and steel mills in fifty cities across ten states, more than 300,000 steelworkers went on strike to demand recognition of the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Workers. Workers expected that President Woodrow Wilson would support their right to strike, as he had during wartime and in his 1916 campaign. However, as industrial production was no longer seen as a national security priority, Wilson remained silent. In response, employers worked to defeat the strike. At first, they ignored the striking workers. Later, they supported efforts like the "Interchurch World Movement," which portrayed companies like U.S. Steel as defenders of traditional values, while labeling unions as radical.[14] Employers also brought African American workers from the South to Northern mills as strikebreakers to keep production going. The failure of the Great Steel Strike of 1919 in early

10 Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (Oxford, 1978).
11 Stephen Meyer, *The Five Dollar Day: Labor Management and Social Control in the Ford Motor Company, 1908-1921* (SUNY Press, 1981).
12 Joseph McCartin, *Labor's Great War: The Struggle for Industrial Democracy and the Origins of Modern American Labor Relations, 1912-1921* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1998).
13 Meredith Tax, *The Rising of the Women: Feminist Solidarity and Class Conflict, 1880-1917* (Verso, 1980).
14 Eldon Ernst, *Moment of Truth for Protestant America: Interchurch Campaigns Following World War One* (American Academy of Religion, 1974).

1920 showed that new industrial systems required new organizing strategies. It was not enough to call a strike—workers also had to build broader support and rethink who could be part of a union.



Packinghouse workers processing meat in long assembly lines, 1892. Chicago Historical Society (ICHi-04076).



By 1908, shoemaking had become even more mechanized. In this factory, young women work side-by-side in long assembly lines. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division (2003654907).

THE GREAT DEPRESSION SPARKS NEW WAYS TO SUPPORT WORKERS

From 1929 through 1941, the Great Depression forced American workers to find new ways to organize and support one another. For example, in the Mississippi Delta, sharecroppers formed cooperatives that pooled resources like equipment and seeds to survive. In New York City, African American tenants organized rent strikes to protest poor housing and racist city planning.[15] Coalitions of unemployed workers staged public marches demanding relief, jobs, and housing. In 1930 alone, Unemployed Councils organized 107 protests in 47 cities.[16] These actions showed the growing pressure on the federal government to respond to workers' needs and **influenced changes** in public policy.

The Democratic Party of the early 1930s represented a coalition of diverse and sometimes competing interests. It included Northern wage earners, Southern plantation owners, and progressive Northern business owners. Franklin Delano Roosevelt's 1932 party platform included rights to collective bargaining, a limited workday, and safe working conditions. Roosevelt also wanted to **change** the way the federal government responded to workers facing unemployment, disability, and the loss of a breadwinner. In what he called a "New Deal," Roosevelt urged Congress to support the principles of "social insurance," the idea that those who could not support themselves ought to receive financial support from the federal government. **Influenced** by socialists, communists, and widespread labor strikes between 1932 and 1937, Roosevelt backed a national wage floor and reforms like the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938. This law banned child labor, limited working hours, and ensured that even low-skill jobs paid enough for a worker to support a family.[17]

Roosevelt's New Deal and related labor laws helped millions of industrial workers join the middle class. Many could now afford homes, cars, pensions, and healthcare. But these protections did not extend to all workers. Agriculture, education, healthcare, and private home workers were largely excluded, reflecting the **influence** of Southern planters. Over time, private employers and city governments exploited these gaps, cutting benefits and outsourcing work, and some unions lost battles simply because their jobs disappeared. Through these struggles, the Depression showed that **innovation** in work and labor policy was not just about technology or efficiency—it was also about finding new ways to organize, negotiate, and protect workers' rights in a rapidly **changing** economy.[18]

15 Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (Grove Press, 1984).
16 The Mapping American Social Movements Project offers teachers and students free interactive maps showing the historical geography of labor movements, civil rights movements, women's movements, and more; see, "Mapping American Social Movements Project," https://depts.washington.edu/moves/unemployed_map.shtml
17 William Leuchtenburg, *Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal: 1932-1940* (Harper Perennial, 2009).
18 Jesse Chanin, *Building Power, Breaking Power: The United Teachers of New Orleans, 1965-2008* (UNC Press, 2024); Gabriel Winant, *The Next Shift: The Fall of Industry and the Rise of Health Care in Rust Belt America* (Harvard University Press, 2021).



Auto workers in Flint, Michigan, 1937, stage a strike wherein they sit down on the job and do not work until the employer is willing to bargain, 1937. Wikimedia Commons.



Employees of Woolworth's holding a sign indicating they are striking for a 40-hour work week, 1937.Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division (LC-USZ62-124545).

WHY LABOR HISTORY MATTERS FOR UNDERSTANDING INNOVATION

The steady decline in industrial manufacturing in the United States over the last 50 years has **impacted** the shape of labor and working-class organizing. Many workers in the United States continue to labor in mines, fields, and factories, usually at an intense pace and alongside precisely engineered robots. Others labor within schools, hospitals, medical clinics, office buildings, public services, retail, warehouses, customer service, or construction. Some members of the working classes, including plumbers, electricians, computer technicians, auto mechanics, and nurses, require years of training to perform their highly skilled labor. Others gain their training on the job. Some workers enjoy relatively higher wages because of the benefit of unions, and others benefit from the relative scarcity of their skills or the social prestige associated with their work.

Innovation is more than new machines or technologies. The **impacts** of **innovations change** the way people work and live. Looking at the history of U.S. labor movements shows how workers responded to those **changes**, fought for fair wages, safer conditions, and political power, and shaped laws and society in the process. By studying these struggles, we see that **innovation** is not just about ideas or tools—it's about how people adapt, resist, and create new ways to protect their lives and communities.

Suggested Project Topics

- American Federation of Labor (AFL)
- The Birth of the "Living Wage"
- The Great Railroad Strike of 1877
- The Great Steel Strike of 1919-1920
- Haymarket Affair (1886)
- International Ladies Garment Workers Union
- The Knights of Labor
- National Labor Relations Act of 1935
- Women's Trade Union League and the Uprising of the 20,000

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