

NAME: _____ Block: _____ DATE: _____

The Rise of Unions

Student Handout #1: Graphic Organizer

	The Knights of Labor (Doc. #1)	The American Federation of Labor (Doc. #2)
When did the Union form? What was the motivating factor for creating the union?		
Who was the leader instrumental in making the organization grow? What was a tactic used to grow the union?		
What was the philosophy or main goals of the union? Were they successful in reaching those goals? Provide an example.		
What groups were allowed to join the union? Who was excluded and why?		
How would you describe the organizational structure of the union? Provide an example.		

The Rise of Unions

Document #1: The Knights of Labor

Many workers in the wake of the [Great Railroad Strike of] 1877 looked to a new labor organization for inspiration. The Knights of Labor had been founded in 1869 in Philadelphia as a secret fraternal organization, one of the many such artisan societies in eastern cities. Under the leadership of Terence Powderly, a machinist by trade, it became public in 1879 and then expanded rapidly in the wake of the Great Railroad Strike, finally achieving hundreds of thousands of members in the 1880s.

The Knights of Labor offered workers an inspiring vision of an alternative to competitive corporate society. . . [T]he Knights opposed the wage labor system, declaring “an inevitable and irresistible conflict between the wage-system of labor and republican system of government.” Instead it offered an inclusive vision of a “cooperative commonwealth” that would include both men and women and would not discriminate by race. In its platform it called for an eight-hour day, equal pay for women, public ownership of railroads, abolition of child labor, and a graduated income tax.

By the late 1870s, the Knights were a potent national federation of unions—or “assemblies”—and departed in several respects from the norm of labor organizations at that time. Most of its assemblies were organized by industry rather than by craft, giving many unskilled and semiskilled workers union representation for the first time. It was also a more inclusive labor organization than most, although in local practice the Knights did not live up to its lofty ideals. Only some assemblies admitted women or blacks. Tendencies toward exclusivity of craft, gender, and race divided and weakened many assemblies.

A paradox of purpose also plagued the Knights. Most members wanted to improve their lot within the existing system through higher wages, shorter hours, better working conditions—the bread-and-butter goals of working people. This meant collective bargaining with employers; it also meant strikes. The assemblies won some strikes and lost some. Powderly and the Knights’ national leadership discouraged strikes, however, partly out of practicality: a losing strike often destroyed an assembly, as employers replaced strikes with strikebreakers, or “scabs.”

Another reason for Powderly’s antistrike stance was philosophical. Strikes constituted a tacit recognition of the legitimacy of the wage system. In Powderly’s view, wages siphoned off to capital a part of the wealth created by labor. The Knights, he said, intended “to secure to the workers the full enjoyment of the wealth they create.” This was a goal grounded both in the past independence of the skilled workers and in a radical vision of the future, in which worker’s cooperatives would own the means of production. . .

The Knights did sponsor several modest workers’ cooperatives. Their success was limited, though, partly from lack of capital and of management experience and partly because even the most skilled craftsmen found it difficult to compete with machines in a mass-production economy. Ironically, the Knights gained their greatest triumphs through strikes. In 1884 and 1885, successful strikes against the Union Pacific and Missouri Pacific

railroads won prestige and a rush of new members, which by 1886 totaled 700,000. Expectations ran high, but defeat in a second strike against the Missouri Pacific in spring 1886 was a serious blow. Then came the Haymarket bombing in Chicago [in 1878]. . .

The Knights of Labor were caught in this anti-labor backlash. Although the Knights had nothing to do with the Haymarket affair and Powderly had repeatedly denounced anarchism, his opposition to the wage system sounded suspiciously like socialism, perhaps even anarchism, to many Americans. Membership in the Knights plummeted from 700,000 in spring 1886 to fewer than 100,000 by 1890. [By 1900 the Knights were all but gone.]

Source: Murrin, John F., et al. *Liberty, Equality, Power: A History of the American People*, 5th ed. New York: Thompson Wadsworth, 2008; 583-584.

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Document #2: The American Federation of Labor

The events of 1886 also signaled the rise of a very different kind of organization, the American Federation of Labor (AFL). Unlike the Knights, the AFL accepted the wage system. Following a strategy of “pure and simple unionism,” the AFL sought recognition of its union status to bargain with employers for better working conditions, higher wages, and shorter hours. In return, it offered compliant firms the benefit of amenable day-to-day relations with the most highly skilled wage earners. Only if companies refused to bargain in good faith would union members resort to strikes.

The new federation, with twelve national unions and 140,000 affiliated members in 1886, rapidly pushed ahead of the rival Knights by organizing craft workers. AFL president Samuel Gompers disregarded unskilled workers, racial minorities, and immigrants, believing they were impossible to organize and even unworthy of membership. He also believed in the “family wage,” which was to be earned by men. Women, Gompers insisted, belonged in the home and not in the factory where they would serve only to lower wages. Under his leadership, the AFL advanced the interests of the “aristocrat of labor,” the best-paid worker in the world.

Unlike the national leadership, local AFL members recuperated some of the best qualities of the Knights of Labor and established a firm basis for a new labor movement. They provided support to strikers, gathered votes for pro-labor political candidates, sponsored social activities, and often published their own weekly newspapers.

Chicago’s Central Labor Federation embodied the new spirit of the AFL. After the Haymarket tragedy, trade unionists worked more closely with urban reformers. Finding allies among women’s clubs and church groups, within the state legislature, and even among some socially minded members of the business community, they cultivated an atmosphere of civic responsibility. The Illinois Factory Investigation Act of 1893 offered evidence of their hard work and patience, securing funds from the state legislature to monitor working conditions, and particularly to improve the woeful situation of the many women and children who worked in sweatshops.

Although the AFL represented only a small minority of working Americans—about 10 percent at the end of the century—local unions often played important roles in their communities. They may not have been able to slow the steady advance of mass production, which diminished the craft worker’s autonomy and eliminated some of the most desirable jobs, but AFL members managed to make their presence felt. Local politicians courted their votes, and Labor Day, first celebrated in the 1880s, became a national holiday in 1894.

Source: Faragher, John M., et al. *Out of Many: A History of the American People*, 5th ed. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2007; 659.