

# An Eclectic List of Events in U.S. Labor History

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## **1806**

The union of Philadelphia Journeymen Cordwainers was convicted of and bankrupted by charges of criminal conspiracy after a strike for higher wages, setting a precedent by which the U.S. government would combat unions for years to come.

## **27 April 1825**

The first strike for the 10-hour work-day occurred by carpenters in Boston.

## **3 July 1835**

Children employed in the silk mills in Paterson, NJ went on strike for the 11 hour day/6 day week.

## **July 1851**

Two railroad strikers were shot dead and others injured by the state militia in Portage, New York.

## **1860**

800 women operatives and 4,000 workmen marched during a shoemaker's strike in Lynn, Massachusetts.

## **13 January 1874**

The original Tompkins Square Riot. As unemployed workers demonstrated in New York's Tompkins Square Park, a detachment of mounted police charged into the crowd, beating men, women and children indiscriminately with billy clubs and leaving hundreds of casualties in their wake. Commented Abram Duryee, the Commissioner of Police: "It was the most glorious sight I ever saw..."

## **12 February 1877**

U.S. railroad workers began strikes to protest wage cuts.

## **21 June 1877**

Ten coal-mining activists ("Molly Maguires") were hanged in Pennsylvania.

## **14 July 1877**

A general strike halted the movement of U.S. railroads. In the following days, strike riots spread across the United States. The next week, federal troops were called out to force an end to the nationwide strike. At the "Battle of the Viaduct" in Chicago, federal troops (recently returned from an Indian massacre) killed 30 workers and wounded over 100.

## **5 September 1882**

Thirty thousand workers marched in the first Labor Day parade in New York City.

## **1884**

The Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions, forerunner of the AFL, passed a resolution stating that "8 hours shall constitute a legal day's work from and after May 1, 1886." Though the Federation did not intend to stimulate a mass insurgency, its resolution had precisely that effect.

## **Late 1885/Early 1886**

Hundreds of thousands of American workers, increasingly determined to resist subjugation to capitalist power, poured into a fledgling labor organization, the Knights of Labor. Beginning on May 1, 1886, they took to the streets to demand the universal adoption of the eight hour day.

Chicago was the center of the movement. Workers there had been agitating for an eight hour day for months, and on the eve of May 1, 50,000 workers were already on strike. 30,000 more swelled their ranks the next day, bringing most of Chicago manufacturing to a standstill. Fears of violent class conflict gripped the city. No violence occurred on May 1 -- a Saturday -- or May 2. But on Monday, May 3, a fight involving hundreds broke out at McCormick Reaper between locked-out unionists and the non-unionist workers McCormick hired to replace them. The Chicago police, swollen in number and heavily armed, quickly moved in with clubs and guns to restore order. They left four unionists dead and many others wounded.

Angered by the deadly force of the police, a group of anarchists, led by August Spies and Albert Parsons, called on workers to arm themselves and participate in a massive protest demonstration in Haymarket Square on Tuesday evening, May 4. The demonstration appeared to be a complete bust, with only 3,000 assembling. But near the end of the evening, an individual, whose identity is still in dispute, threw a bomb that killed seven policemen and injured 67 others. Hysterical city and state government officials rounded up eight anarchists, tried them for murder, and sentenced them to death.

On 11 November 1887, four of them, including Parsons and Spies, were executed. All of the executed advocated armed struggle and violence as revolutionary methods, but their prosecutors found no evidence that any had actually thrown the Haymarket bomb. They died for their words, not their deeds. A quarter of a million people lined Chicago's street during Parson's funeral procession to express their outrage at this gross mis-carriage of justice.

For radicals and trade unionists everywhere, Haymarket became a symbol of the stark inequality and injustice of capitalist society. The May 1886 Chicago events figured prominently in the decision of the founding congress of the Second International (Paris, 1889) to make May 1, 1890 a demonstration of the solidarity and power of the international working class movement. May Day has been a celebration of international socialism and (after 1917) international communism ever since.

The Bayview Massacre also took place at this time (for more detailed information visit <http://www.execpc.com/~blake/rollin~1.htm>), where seven people, including one child, were killed by state militia. On 1 May 1886 about 2,000 Polish workers walked off their jobs and gathered at Saint Stanislaus Church in Milwaukee, angrily denouncing the ten hour workday. They then marched through the city, calling on other workers to join them; as a result, all but one factory was closed down as sixteen thousand protesters gathered at Rolling Mills, prompting Wisconsin Governor Jeremiah Rusk to call the state militia. The militia camped out at the mill while workers slept in nearby fields, and on the morning of May 5th, as protesters chanted for the eight hour workday, General Treauer ordered his men to shoot into the crowd, some of whom were carrying sticks, bricks, and scythes, leaving seven dead at the scene. The Milwaukee Journal reported that eight more would die within twenty four hours, and without hesitation added that Governor Rusk was to be commended for his quick action in the matter.

### **23 November 1887**

The [Thibodaux Massacre](#). The Louisiana Militia, aided by bands of "prominent citizens," shot at least 35 unarmed black sugar workers striking to gain a dollar-per-day wage, and lynched two strike leaders.

### **25 July 1890**

New York garment workers won the right to unionize after a seven-month strike. They secured agreements for a closed shop, and firing of all scabs.

**6 July 1892**

The Homestead Strike. Pinkerton Guards, trying to pave the way for the introduction of scabs, opened fire on striking Carnegie mill steel-workers in Homestead, Pennsylvania. In the ensuing battle, three Pinkertons surrendered; then, unarmed, they were set upon and beaten by a mob of townspeople, most of them women. Seven guards and eleven strikers and spectators were shot to death.

**11 July 1892**

Striking miners in Coeur D'Alene, Idaho dynamited the Frisco Mill, leaving it in ruins.

**1893**

The first of several bloody mining strikes at [Cripple Creek, Colorado](#).

**5 July 1893**

During a strike against the Pullman Palace Car Company, which had drastically reduced wages, the 1892 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago's Jackson Park was set ablaze, and seven buildings were reduced to ashes. The mobs raged on, burning and looting railroad cars and fighting police in the streets, until 10 July, when 14,000 federal and state troops finally succeeded in putting down the strike.

**1894**

Federal troops killed 34 American Railway Union members in the Chicago area attempting to break a strike, led by Eugene Debs, against the Pullman Company. Debs and several others were imprisoned for violating injunctions, causing disintegration of the union.

**21 September 1896**

The state militia was sent to Leadville, Colorado to break a miner's strike.

**10 September 1897**

19 unarmed striking coal miners and mine workers were killed and 36 wounded by a posse organized by the Luzerne County sheriff for refusing to disperse near Lattimer, Pennsylvania. The strikers, most of whom were shot in the back, were originally brought in as strike-breakers, but later organized themselves.

**1898**

A portion of the Erdman Act, which would have made it a criminal offense for railroads to dismiss employees or discriminate against prospective employees based on their union activities, was declared invalid by the United States Supreme Court.

**12 October 1898**

Fourteen were killed, 25 wounded in violence resulting when Virden, Illinois mine owners attempted to break a strike by importing 200 nonunion black workers.

**29 April 1899**

When their demand that only union men be employed was refused, members of the Western Federation of Miners dynamited the \$250,000 mill of the Bunker Hill Company at Wardner, Idaho, destroying it completely. President McKinley responded by sending in black soldiers from Brownsville, Texas with orders to round up thousands of miners and confine them in specially built "bullpens."

**1899 and 1901**

U.S. Army troops occupied the Coeur d'Alene mining region in Idaho.

**12 October 1902**

Fourteen miners were killed and 22 wounded by scabherders at Pana, Illinois.

### **23 November 1903**

Troops were [dispatched to Cripple Creek, Colorado](#) to control rioting by striking coal miners.

### **July 1903**

Labor organizer [Mary Harris \("Mother"\) Jones](#) leads child workers in demanding a 55 hour work week.

### **23 February 1904**

William Randolph Hearst's San Francisco Chronicle began publishing articles on the menace of Japanese laborers, leading to a resolution of the California Legislature that action be taken against their immigration.

### **8 June 1904**

A battle between the Colorado Militia and striking miners at Dunnville ended with six union members dead and 15 taken prisoner. Seventy-nine of the strikers were deported to Kansas two days later.

### **17 April 1905**

The Supreme Court held that a maximum hours law for New York bakery workers was unconstitutional under the due process clause of the 14th ammendment.

### **1908**

The Erdman Act was further weakened when Section 10 was declared unconstitutional. This section had made it illegal for railroad employers to fire employees for being involved in union activities (see [1898](#)).

### **22 November 1909**

The "Uprising of the 20,000." Female garment workers went on strike in New York; many were arrested. A judge told those arrested: "You are on strike against God."

### **25 December 1910**

A dynamite bomb destroyed a portion of the Llewellyn Ironworks in Los Angeles, where a bitter strike was in progress.

### **1911**

The Supreme Court ordered the AFL to cease its promotion of a boycott against the Bucks Stove and Range Company. A contempt charge against union leaders (including AFL President Samuel Gompers) was dismissed on technical grounds.

### **25 March 1911**

The Triangle Shirtwaist Company, occupying the top three floors of a ten-story building in New York City, was consumed by fire. One hundred and forty-seven people, mostly women and young girls working in sweatshop conditions, lost their lives. Approximately 50 died as they leapt from windows to the street; the others were burned or trampled to death as they desperately attempted to escape through stairway exits locked as a precaution against "the interruption of work". On 11 April the company's owners were indicted for manslaughter.

### **2 December 1911**

A Chicago "slugger," paid \$50 by labor unions for every scab he "discouraged," described his job in an interview: "Oh, there ain't nothin' to it. I gets my fifty, then I goes out and finds the guy they wanna have slugged. I goes up to `im and I says to `im, 'My friend, by way of meaning no harm,' and then I gives it to `im -- biff! in the mug. Nothin' to it."

### **24 February 1912**

Women and children were beaten by police during a textile strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts.

**18 April 1912**

The National Guard was called out against striking West Virginia coal miners.

**11 June 1913**

Police shot three maritime workers (one of whom was killed) who were striking against the United Fruit Company in New Orleans.

**5 January 1914**

The Ford Motor Company raised its basic wage from \$2.40 for a nine hour day to \$5 for an eight hour day.