

THE STRIKES OF 1919

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During the years that followed World War I, the United States suffered economically. Industries had to cut back their workforce, which resulted in many people finding themselves unemployed. Tensions rose between labor and management as thousands of soldiers returned home from the war and unemployment skyrocketing. Just in the year 1919, almost three-thousand strikes occurred. There were three strikes that stood out the most; the police strike in Boston, the coal strike in Montana, and the steel strike in Pittsburgh. People went on strike because they demanded higher wages, better job security, and better working conditions. Due to America's economical trouble in 1919 thousands of strikes occurred with people demanding more from industries, but the police, coal, and steel strikes stood out the most.

America faced economical trouble in 1919. The industrial system, which had dedicated itself to producing goods for the war, struggled in transitioning back to a peacetime economy after the war.¹ Tensions rose between labor and management as nearly 4.5 million soldiers returned home from the war unemployed. Industrialists needed to change the types of products they were making because the government did not need weapons, gas masks, or other war supplies.¹ Industries lost government contracts and were forced to decrease production. This led to nearly three thousand strikes occurring in just the year 1919 alone.

In Boston, the police had not received a wage increase since the beginning of the war. They continuously asked for a raise but kept being denied. They needed the extra money because they were having trouble paying their bills due to the rising prices of goods.¹ The police were also not allowed to unionize. These problems caused them to go on strike on September 9th. A crowd of over ten-thousand people gathered.² However, it didn't end well. Governor

¹ Lesson 2 Notes

² Wieneke, David. "The Boston Police Strike." iBoston. Accessed December 7, 2020. www.iboston.org/mcp.php?pid=policeStrike.

Calvin Coolidge believed that the police did not have the right to strike as he felt it would cause a feeling of insecurity within the public. Those who went on strike were fired, and new officers were hired in their place. The Police strike was much different than the Coal and Steel strikes as the police did not get what they wanted in this case, while the strikers did during the other strikes. This strike was not the best action to take, because it gave the public a feeling of insecurity.

In Montana, coal workers lucked out more in unionizing as compared to the Boston police officers. They formed the United Mine Workers of America union in 1890. John Llewellyn Lewis, the union leader elected in 1919, and union members requested higher wages and a shorter workday.¹ Take a guess at what happened... they were rejected. Surprise! In November of that same year, a strike was called. However, the striking conditions were not the most favorable. On December 8th, the temperature went as far down as -35°F. On December 11th and the 12th, over a foot of snow fell. December 11th saw it even worse, -52° to -56°F.³ A court order had been obtained that stated the workers must return back to work, but it was dismissed by them. In the end, the workers were given a 27% wage increase, but they did not get a shorter workday.¹ The strikers took the correct action, because they were standing up for their rights as workers.

Let's now take a trip to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Steel workers of the U.S. Steel Corporation had requested collective bargaining rights, higher wages, union recognition, and a shorter workday. All of these requests were rejected. So just like the other two instances in which this happened, the workers went on strike. However, this strike was much bigger than the

³ Gibson, Richard. A Cold November: The Coal Strike of 1919, November 12, 2014. buttehistory.blogspot.com/2014/11/a-cold-november-coal-strike-of-1919.html.

other two. Nearly three-hundred thousand workers went on strike. A union "free speech" campaign was successful in the mid-Monongahela Valley, where marches by thousands of coal miners led by mineworker organizer William Feeney opened up Monessen, Donora, and Clairton to the union organizing campaign.⁴ U.S. Steel management hired strikebreakers, which included police, federal troops, and state militias, to put the strike to a stop.¹ The workers eventually, after four months, returned to work. They won a shorter workday but were still not allowed to unionize. Just like the coal strike, they did not get everything that they wanted, but took the correct action, as they were standing up for their rights as workers.

1919 was not a good year for the United States economically. They were having trouble bouncing back from World War I. With millions of soldiers returning home unemployed, and tensions rising between workers and industries, strikes were breaking out left and right. Out of the nearly three thousand strikes that occurred, three stand out the most. The Boston police strike, the coal strike in Montana, and the steel strike in Pittsburgh. The Boston police strike didn't end favorably for the police, and in the coal and steel strikes the workers only got some of what they wanted, not everything. These strikes go to show the true economic trouble our country was in during 1919.

⁴ "The Great Steel Strike of 1919 Historical Marker." ExplorePAHistory.com. Accessed December 7, 2020. explorepahistory.com/hmarker.php?markerId=1-A-242.

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