

## Workers Attempt to Organize

*The rise of large factories created plentiful jobs for the people of the Northeast, but the working conditions were unpleasant and dangerous. How did laborers attempt to bring about change?*

By the 1830s, an effort to improve working conditions had begun. In the spirit of Jacksonian democracy, many states expanded the right to vote to white laboring men. Attempts were made to create workingmen's parties, but the bulk of these voters gave their loyalty to Andrew Jackson and the Democratic Party. Chief amongst their goals were higher wages, improved working conditions, and a ten-hour workday.

### Words to watch for:

*stern    leisure*  
*initiate    pessimism*

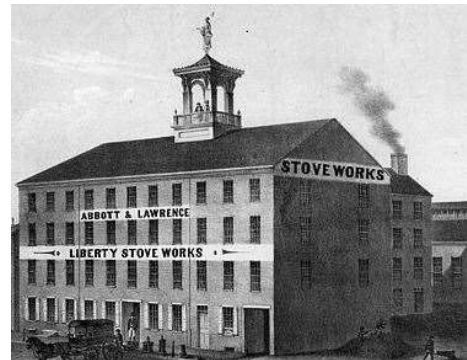
Factory owners sternly opposed these efforts. Common arguments against the demands of the workers were that productivity would be lost, costs would go up, and that workers would become demoralized. If the labor force was not on the job all day long, many argued, the increased leisure time would lead to drinking and other forms of mischief.

A notable gain was made in 1840 when President Martin Van Buren established a ten-hour workday for federal employees. In time, some states followed this example and reduced the hours of other workers as well. While progress via political means was slow, laborers discovered other means of bringing about change.

In the mid-1830s, skilled workers in New York City staged dozens of strikes. During a strike, laborers lay down their tools and refuse to work until certain demands are met. Such strikes continued during the 1830s and '40s, and employers often resisted by using strikebreakers. Strikebreakers are replacement workers, and during the 1830s, they were usually immigrants who had just arrived from Ireland or Europe. Eager for employment, immigrants were often willing to work in squalid conditions and for very little pay.

Many of the strikes were organized by trade unions. Trade unions are organizations made up of workers who practice the same skill. In 1833, the General Trades' Union was formed in New York City. The GTU sought to unite and coordinate the numerous trade societies in New York. It provided monetary assistance to striking workers as well.

The GTU also formed the National Trades' Union, which is seen as the first attempt to create a nationwide union movement. It also initiated the system known as collective bargaining. Collective bargaining is the negotiation of wages and other conditions of employment by an organized body of employees.



Labor's progress came to a crashing halt in 1837. That year, an economic recession (known as the Panic of 1837) led to widespread unemployment, plummeting union membership, and the collapse of the National Trades' Union. Pessimism abounded until the recession ended in the mid-1840s. However, organized labor did receive a substantial victory in 1842. That year, the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled in *Commonwealth v. Hunt* that labor unions were not illegal conspiracies, so long as their efforts were "honorable and peaceful." This began a trend toward legalizing the method of going on strike, something that had been illegal across the country in the early 1800s.

**Guided Reading:** *Fill in the blanks below to create complete sentences.*

1. In the spirit of \_\_\_\_\_, many states expanded the right to vote to white laboring men.
  
2. Chief amongst the goals of early labor efforts were higher wages, improved working conditions, and a \_\_\_\_\_ workday.
  
3. Many factory owners argued that increased leisure time would lead to drinking and other forms of \_\_\_\_\_.
  
4. In the mid-1830s, skilled workers in \_\_\_\_\_ staged dozens of strikes.
  
5. During the 1830s and '40s, employers often resisted strikes by using \_\_\_\_\_.
  
6. Eager for employment, immigrants were often willing to work in \_\_\_\_\_ conditions.
  
7. Many of the strikes were organized by \_\_\_\_\_.
  
8. In 1833, the \_\_\_\_\_ was formed in New York City.
  
9. \_\_\_\_\_ is the negotiation of wages and other conditions of employment by an organized body of employees.
  
10. The Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled that labor unions were not illegal conspiracies, so long as their efforts were “\_\_\_\_\_.”

**Multiple Choice:** *Select the choice that completes the statement or answers the question.*

1. \_\_\_\_\_ When white working class men got the right to vote in the 1820s, who received the bulk of their support?
  - a. John Quincy Adams and the Federalists
  - b. Andrew Jackson and the Democratic Party
  - c. Millard Fillmore and the Know Nothing Party
  - d. their votes were just about evenly distributed amongst several parties
  
2. \_\_\_\_\_ Which of the following was NOT mentioned as an argument against the labor movement?
  - a. productivity would be lost
  - b. costs would rise
  - c. workers could be easily replaced
  - d. increased leisure time would lead to mischief
  
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Which president established a ten-hour workday for federal employees?
  - a. John Quincy Adams
  - b. Andrew Jackson
  - c. Martin Van Buren
  - d. James Buchanan
  
4. \_\_\_\_\_ Which of the following statements is accurate?
  - a. Very few strikes were organized by trade unions.
  - b. Trade unions are organizations made up of workers who excel at different skills.
  - c. The General Trades' Union was formed in New Jersey.
  - d. The General Trades' Union sought to unite and coordinate numerous trade societies.
  
5. \_\_\_\_\_ Which of the following best explains why the advancements of organized labor came to a halt in 1837?
  - a. The Supreme Court ruled that labor unions were unconstitutional.
  - b. The Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled that going on strike was illegal.
  - c. An economic recession led to widespread unemployment and plummeting union membership.
  - d. Several labor union leaders were arrested and imprisoned for embezzlement.

**Vocabulary:** *Match each word with its correct definition. Consider how the word is used in the lesson. This might help you define each term. Use a dictionary to help if necessary.*

- |                         |              |
|-------------------------|--------------|
| a. Jacksonian Democracy | d. initiate  |
| b. stern                | e. pessimism |
| c. leisure              |              |

6. \_\_\_\_\_ a lack of hope or confidence in the future
  
7. \_\_\_\_\_ a 19th-century political philosophy that espoused greater democracy for the common man
  
8. \_\_\_\_\_ in a serious and severe manner, especially when asserting authority
  
9. \_\_\_\_\_ to cause a process or action to begin
  
10. \_\_\_\_\_ use of free time for enjoyment

**Summarize:** *Answer the following questions in the space provided. Attempt to respond in a complete sentence for each question. Be sure to use correct capitalization and punctuation!*

1. Who established a ten-hour workday for federal employees?
2. What is considered to be the first attempt to create a nationwide union movement?
3. When was the General Trades' Union formed?
4. Where was the General Trades' Union formed?
5. Why were labor unions weakened in 1837?
6. How did the Massachusetts Supreme Court rule in *Commonwealth v. Hunt*?

**Student Response:** *Write a paragraph addressing the questions raised below. A thorough response should consist of at least five complete sentences.*

7. In this lesson, you read about the early attempts at organizing laborers and the impact that the Panic of 1837 had on the movement. Why do you suppose that labor unions are often weakened during economic recessions and depressions? Explain your answer!