Power in Numbers

How industrial workers organized for change

SS24.US1.18c "Summarize the rise of labor unions and their efforts to improve working conditions in industrial America."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline two conditions that led workers to organize, circle two methods unions used to seek change, and write a 1 beside one obstacle unions faced. Use your marks to trace why unions grew and how they tried to improve work.

Workers Join Forces

1. At the end of the 1800s, a steelworker could face a twelve-hour shift beside hot machinery, with little protection from injury. Factory owners often set pay and rules for thousands of workers, while each worker had limited power to object. As industry expanded, workers began joining labor unions to act together. The Knights of Labor, founded in 1869, grew rapidly in the 1880s. They welcomed many kinds of workers, including skilled and unskilled laborers, and called for an eight-hour workday. Their growth showed how industrial workers could turn shared problems into organized demands.

2. Not all unions organized in the same way. The American Federation of Labor (AFL), formed in 1886, brought together unions of skilled workers in particular trades. Its leaders focused on practical gains such as higher wages, shorter hours, and safer workplaces. Union members could bargain with employers as a group, asking for a contract instead of accepting rules one worker at a time. If talks failed, they might strike, withholding their labor to pressure an employer. These methods sometimes won improvements, but employers could replace strikers or refuse to negotiate. Workers risked losing wages while a strike lasted.

3. In 1894, workers at the Pullman railcar company struck after wage cuts while rents in the company town remained high. The American Railway Union, led by Eugene V. Debs, supported them by boycotting trains carrying Pullman cars. This action spread the dispute beyond one workplace. A federal court issued an order against the boycott, and federal troops were sent to keep trains moving. The strike collapsed, and the workers did not win their immediate demands. The Pullman conflict shows both the reach of organized workers and the strong resistance they faced from employers and the federal government.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. Why did industrial workers join unions instead of asking employers for changes one at a time?

2. How did the Knights of Labor and the AFL differ in whom they organized and what they sought to improve?

3. Explain how two methods in the passage could help union members seek better working conditions.

4. What does the Pullman conflict show about both the power and the limits of organized labor?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a six-sentence newspaper editorial from the 1890s explaining why unions grew and whether collective action could improve industrial work. Use the Knights of Labor, the AFL, and the Pullman conflict as evidence, and include at least two union methods, two desired improvements, and one obstacle.

ANSWER KEY

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GRADE 10 · SS24.US1.18c

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline two conditions that led workers to organize, circle two methods unions used to seek change, and write a 1 beside one obstacle unions faced. Use your marks to trace why unions grew and how they tried to improve work. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	Why did industrial workers join unions instead of asking employers for changes one at a time?	**Workers faced long hours, injury risks, and limited individual power. Joining together gave them a stronger way to demand changes.**
2	How did the Knights of Labor and the AFL differ in whom they organized and what they sought to improve?	**The Knights welcomed many kinds of workers and called for an eight-hour day. The AFL brought together skilled trade unions and sought higher wages, shorter hours, and safer workplaces.**
3	Explain how two methods in the passage could help union members seek better working conditions.	**Group bargaining let members ask for a contract together. A strike withheld their labor to pressure an employer when talks failed.**
4	What does the Pullman conflict show about both the power and the limits of organized labor?	**The railway boycott spread workers' protest beyond Pullman, showing the reach of collective action. A court order and federal troops helped end the strike without workers winning their demands.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Industrial workers formed unions because long hours, dangerous workplaces, and unequal power left individuals with little say. The Knights of Labor gathered many kinds of workers and demanded an eight-hour day. The AFL joined skilled workers in trades to seek higher pay and safer conditions. By bargaining together or striking, workers could put pressure on employers that one worker could not. Yet the Pullman boycott collapsed after a court order and federal troops intervened, showing that unions faced powerful opponents. Unions may win better conditions, but their efforts depend on whether workers can maintain unity when employers and government resist.

Accept different judgments about unions' effectiveness if the six-sentence editorial uses all three named examples and accurately explains the required methods, improvements, and obstacle. For the marking job, students may select any two supported conditions, two union methods, and one obstacle from the passage.