Power on the Picket Line

How postwar workers gained leverage and faced new limits

9-12.US2.28 "Analyze the American Labor Movement during the post-war period."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline two reasons workers organized after World War II, circle two limits on union power, and number two ways the labor movement changed over time. Use your marks to trace how workers responded to new conditions.

What Changed for American Workers?

1. In 1946, more than four million Americans joined strikes, including workers in steel, coal, and railroads. During World War II, unions had often agreed not to strike, while federal wage controls held down pay. After the war, prices rose as those controls ended, and workers sought raises that would keep pace. Employers worried that higher wages would raise costs. For families, a strike could mean lost pay before it brought a better contract. The strike wave showed that unions could unite workers across industries, but it also frustrated people who depended on trains, fuel, and other services.

2. Congress responded to the strike wave with the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, passed over President Harry Truman's veto. The law allowed states to ban contracts requiring workers to join a union or pay union fees as a condition of employment. It also permitted a president to seek a court order temporarily stopping a strike that threatened national health or safety. Supporters said these limits protected the public and individual workers. Union leaders argued that the restrictions weakened bargaining power. The law did not end unions: in 1955, the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations merged to form the AFL-CIO.

3. Union power did not grow evenly across jobs or communities. Many public employees gained stronger organizing rights in the 1960s. In 1968, Black sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee, struck after years of low pay and unsafe conditions. Their demand for recognition, summed up by the words “I AM A MAN,” linked labor rights with civil rights. Meanwhile, factory jobs began moving to regions where unions were weaker, and automation reduced some industrial work. These changes made it harder for unions to maintain membership in certain industries. The Memphis strike showed that labor organizing could challenge racial injustice even as economic shifts threatened older union strongholds.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did wartime wage controls and postwar prices help cause the 1946 strike wave?

2. Why did supporters and union leaders judge the Taft-Hartley Act differently?

3. Why does the 1955 AFL-CIO merger challenge the claim that the Taft-Hartley Act ended the labor movement?

4. How does the Memphis strike show a goal of labor organizing that went beyond pay? What economic change threatened union strength at the same time?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Imagine workers at a grocery warehouse in 1970 facing automation and considering a strike for retraining and higher pay. In four or five sentences, connect two different developments in the passage to their choices, predict one benefit and one risk of striking, and explain which concern you would address first.

ANSWER KEY

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HIGH SCHOOL · 9-12.US2.28

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline two reasons workers organized after World War II, circle two limits on union power, and number two ways the labor movement changed over time. Use your marks to trace how workers responded to new conditions. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did wartime wage controls and postwar prices help cause the 1946 strike wave?	**Wage controls had held down pay during the war. When prices rose after the war, workers struck to seek raises that would keep pace.**
2	Why did supporters and union leaders judge the Taft-Hartley Act differently?	**Supporters believed its limits protected the public and individual workers. Union leaders believed the limits weakened unions' bargaining power.**
3	Why does the 1955 AFL-CIO merger challenge the claim that the Taft-Hartley Act ended the labor movement?	**Two major labor organizations united after the law passed, showing that unions continued to organize despite new restrictions.**
4	How does the Memphis strike show a goal of labor organizing that went beyond pay? What economic change threatened union strength at the same time?	**Black sanitation workers sought recognition and challenged racial injustice as well as low pay and unsafe conditions. Automation and the movement of factory jobs to regions with weaker unions threatened union strength.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

The 1946 strike wave suggests that a united walkout could pressure an employer to bargain for higher pay. Workers should also seek retraining because automation had reduced some industrial jobs. A strike might win a better contract, but workers could lose pay while it lasts. I would address lost pay first by planning how families could cover expenses during a walkout. That preparation would help workers press for retraining and raises while facing the strike's risks.

Accept other supported connections, including the effects of Taft-Hartley or the Memphis workers' demands. The response should distinguish a possible benefit from a risk and explain a priority.