# Unions Under Pressure

Early labor goals and the setbacks that tested them

**USH.C.2.1.G** "Assess the significance of the Labor Movement, including the leadership of Samuel Gompers and Eugene V. Debs, by comparing its early goals (e.g...."

NAME _____ DATE _____

## 1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

**YOUR JOB** Underline two early goals of the labor movement, circle one consequence of Haymarket and one consequence of Pullman, and write 1 beside Gompers's approach and 2 beside Debs's approach so you can compare goals, leadership, and outcomes.

### What Could Workers Change?

1. In the late 1800s, a railroad worker might work long hours while a company controlled both jobs and housing. Workers organized trade unions to bargain together for better pay, shorter hours, and safer workplaces. Many also sought laws limiting work hours. Samuel Gompers, who became the American Federation of Labor's first president in 1886, focused on practical gains through unions of skilled workers, bargaining, and strikes when needed. Eugene V. Debs later led the American Railway Union, which welcomed railroad workers across different trades. Their approaches differed, but both challenged the idea that employers alone should set working conditions.

2. At a Chicago rally in 1886, people protested police violence against strikers fighting for an eight-hour workday. As police moved to disperse the gathering at Haymarket Square, someone threw a bomb. The bomber's identity remains unknown. Police and civilians died amid the blast and gunfire. Eight anarchists were convicted in a trial widely criticized as unfair, although none was proved to have thrown the bomb. Newspapers often linked the violence to organized labor, and public suspicion hurt the movement for shorter hours. Some union leaders, including Gompers, rejected violence and continued seeking gains through organized bargaining.

3. In 1894, Pullman cut wages at its factory near Chicago but not rents in its company town. When Pullman refused to negotiate, workers struck, and Debs's American Railway Union organized a boycott of trains carrying Pullman cars. The boycott spread across rail lines, showing how workers could use shared action to pressure a powerful company. The federal government obtained an injunction against the boycott and sent troops, arguing that rail traffic and mail service had to continue. Violence followed, the strike collapsed, and Debs went to prison for defying the injunction. Federal intervention weakened the union and exposed limits on workers' power.

## 2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did the response to Haymarket make one early labor goal harder to achieve?

2. How did Gompers's and Debs's approaches to improving working conditions differ?

3. At Pullman, what did workers try to change, and how did the strike's outcome limit their effort?

4. How did the setback after Haymarket differ from the setback after Pullman, and why did each matter to unions?

## 3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a 75 to 95 word museum label judging whether the labor movement's early goals were advanced or obstructed by these two events. Compare the leaders' approaches, cite a consequence of each event, and explain why your judgment is not simply "success" or "failure."

ANSWER KEY

# Unions Under Pressure

HIGH SCHOOL · USH.C.2.1.G

## PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline two early goals of the labor movement, circle one consequence of Haymarket and one consequence of Pullman, and write 1 beside Gompers's approach and 2 beside Debs's approach so you can compare goals, leadership, and outcomes. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

## PART 2 · ANSWERS

| # | QUESTION | ANSWER |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | How did the response to Haymarket make one early labor goal harder to achieve? | **Workers sought shorter hours, but newspapers linked the Haymarket violence to organized labor, increasing public suspicion and hurting that campaign.** |
| 2 | How did Gompers's and Debs's approaches to improving working conditions differ? | **Gompers focused on gains through skilled trade unions and bargaining, while Debs led a union across railroad trades that organized a boycott.** |
| 3 | At Pullman, what did workers try to change, and how did the strike's outcome limit their effort? | **Workers challenged wage cuts while rents stayed the same. The boycott collapsed after federal intervention, and the union was weakened.** |
| 4 | How did the setback after Haymarket differ from the setback after Pullman, and why did each matter to unions? | **After Haymarket, public suspicion hurt support for shorter hours. After Pullman, a federal injunction and troops helped end a boycott, weakening the union's ability to pressure the company.** |

## PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Workers first formed unions to bargain for better pay and shorter hours, and they also wanted protective laws. Gompers emphasized skilled trade unions and bargaining, while Debs built a union across railroad trades and backed a boycott. After Haymarket, suspicion of organized labor made the campaign for shorter hours harder, even though no convicted person was proved to have thrown the bomb. After Pullman, a federal injunction helped break the boycott and Debs was jailed. These setbacks limited workers' power, but the boycott showed how workers could act together across rail lines.

Accept judgments that distinguish the movement's goals and collective power from the public and federal responses that limited its efforts. Students may emphasize either progress or obstruction if they support the judgment with both events and compare the leaders' approaches.