

US History

Social & Political History of the 1920s

Learning Target:

I can identify and examine four main problems facing post-war America, nativism & isolationism, the Red Scare, labor unrest, and race relations.

3. Postwar Issues - Labor Unrest

- Demobilization had made life very difficult for the average American worker
- Workers demanded higher wages and shorter work hours

- Workers pleas were ignored leading to many strikes
 - 1919 – More than 3,600 work stoppages involving over 4 million workers

The Strikes of 1919 –

The Boston Police Strike (Sept. 1919) –

- Officers had recently formed a union looking for better pay and conditions
- Police commissioner refused to recognize the union
 - Fired 19 officers for engaging in union activities
 - In response the police went on strike
- Public order quickly crumbled after the strike – looting happened in the city
- After two nights Governor Coolidge called in the state militia

- Public and media reaction to the strike –
 - Newspapers denounced the strike and labeled them “Agents of Lenin”
 - Public opinion also firmly against the strike

- Police recognized their cause was doomed and voted to return to work
- Commissioner hired replacements and refused to give officers their jobs back
- Governor backed the police commissioner

The Steel Strike (Sept. 1919 – Jan. 1920) –

- 365,000 steelworkers walked off the job in places like Pittsburgh
- Demanded recognition of their union, better pay, and shorter hours
- Strike threatened to shut down the steel industry

- Steel companies tactics to break the strike –
 - Divide labor along ethnic lines
 - Portrayed foreign workers as radicals & communists
 - Had police intimidate strikers

- Facing these challenges the union leaders called off the strike on Jan. 9, 1920

United Mine Workers Strike (Nov. 1919) –

- Last major strike of 1919
- 400,000 miners walked out of mines
- Protested continued enforcement of wartime contracts keeping their pay at 1917 levels
- John L. Lewis organized the strike and would become a labor leader
- Would eventually get a 14% raise for mine workers
- Lewis seen by the public as a Bolshevik
- Like most strikes of 1919, it was unpopular with the public

Labor Movement Loses Appeal –

- Union membership declined during the 1920s (5 million to 3.5 million)
- Americans faith in unions was declining