

Labor and government help regulate the workplace, 1900-1950

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Overview

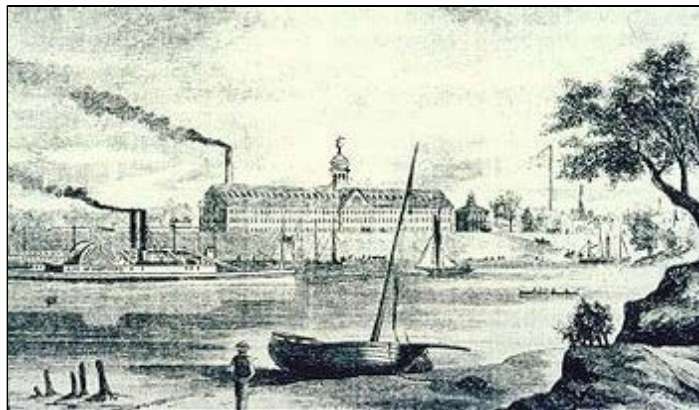
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Compelling question: Why do workers join unions?





Colt's Armory in 1857, looking west across the Connecticut River, and Colt's Armory in 2012, shut down in 1992.

Introduction

Colt's Firearms History

The Colt's Firearms Company, founded in 1855 by Samuel Colt, is known for engineering, production, the use of machine tools to produce and market firearms. It is also known for tension between management and workers.

In this exercise, you will use various types of documents to assess workers' reactions to industrialization in the 20th century and evaluate the reasons they chose to join together and go on strike and join a union.

Supporting Question

- Why do people form a union?

Connecticut State Standards

Page numbers refer to the [Connecticut Social Studies Frameworks](#)

:

- Evaluate the impact of the New Deal on various groups from that group's perspective, including the views of men, women, children, underrepresented groups, industrial workers, farmers, and the elderly, p. 133.
- Analyze the role of the federal government in supporting and inhibiting various 20th century civil rights movements, p. 133.

Purpose

To understand:

- why workers band together in a union;
- what can make union organizing successful;
- what it means to be a worker and what rights workers have;
- how the context in which workers strike makes a big difference;
- what factors help/hinder workers getting power?

Historical Context

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Between the 1850s and 1920, Colt's dominated the gun industry and influenced the making of guns and machine tooled products nationwide. Colt's workers were the first among gunmakers to use interchangeable parts to make the whole gun. The company led in international marketing and using an assembly line.

The assembly line sped up production; at the same time, it took away the need for skilled craftsmen who could produce the entire gun. Colt used machine tools that could make parts to exact measurements, making them interchangeable with the same type of gun. This made it easier to hire workers with less skill for the assembly line. The less skill a worker had, the more easily the worker could be replaced and the less the worker could be paid.

During World War I, the advancement in machine tools, and the increasing need for unskilled workers, led to the hiring of more women for the assembly lines. At Colt's, like many other manufacturers, management found that women could do the necessary work, and did not have to be paid as much per hour. Generally workers did not control the speed of the assembly line, nor did they have the satisfaction of completing the whole product.

Colt's was one of the first companies to market internationally. Colt's sold weapons to both sides in the Crimean War (1854-1856 near the Black Sea). During World War I, Colt's sold guns to countries in Latin

America and also supplied the Allies.

Samuel Colt built his Armory in 1855, and built his home Armsmead in 1856 on top of the hill looking down on the factory and the Connecticut River. He also built 20 small tenements and 10 three-story houses in a workingmen's village in the factory neighborhood for his workers on Huyslope and Van Block Avenues, making Coltsville a company town.

As for working conditions, Colt established a ten hour day, had washing stations installed in his factory, and made sure that each worker had a one hour lunch break. He built Charter Oak Hall, where workers could play games, read newspapers and hold discussions. The factory sponsored softball and bowling leagues and a Colt's Armory Band in an effort to build loyalty and pride in the company. Samuel Colt provided these benefits for his workers and, at the same time, became one of the ten wealthiest business owners in the U.S.

Colt was a strict employer who fired workers for being tardy, for shoddy work, or even for suggesting improvements to the revolver design. Even with attempts to promote loyalty, traditions of 19th century craft workers had profound effects on the outlook of workers at Colt's. Skilled machinists, polishers, toolmakers all felt they had the right to control the pace and organization of work. The union the workers belonged to educated them in this way. But, in the 1900s and 1910s, male workers lost control of production with the new machines, and sometimes even women took their jobs. This became the objects of strikes.

In popular culture, Colt's was seen as a good place to work. But, Colt's workers had a militant tradition. They held strikes in 1901, 1912, 1915, 1916, and 1918. The workers were part of the International Association of Machinists and some of these strikes were nationwide. These strikes aimed to get workers a signed contract, restriction on the use of apprentices, grievance procedure, and 10 hours pay for 9 hours work.

In reaction, manufacturers joined together in the Hartford Manufacturers Association to combat the union. The union was able to get the 10 hours pay for 9 hour day, but without union recognition. The IAM and the Metal Polishers Union did not allow women to be

members, so Colt's hired women to replace the union members during World War I.

During World War I, Colt's workforce grew from 2400 in 1916 to 10,000 employees in 1918. In the 1920s, under President Samuel Stone, the company diversified by getting contracts for business machines, calculators, dishwashers, motorcycles, and cars. They bought a firm which made plastics and one that made electrical products. The company survived by cutting the work week, reducing salaries, and keeping more workers on the payroll than they needed.

The workers tried to unionize several times - the first in the mid-1930s under Section 7-A of the National Industrial Recovery Act. The strike ended when the Supreme Court struck down the NIRA in the 13th week of the strike and when radicals detonated a small bomb on Stone's doorstep to his West Hartford home. During World War II, the workforce grew from 1300 in 1940 to 16,000 by 1943. The workers finally got unionized in 1941 in the United Electrical Workers Union.

In 1933, as part of the New Deal, Congress passed the National Industrial Recovery Act. Title I of this act guaranteed rights to unions, making it necessary for companies to negotiate with their unions. This law encouraged union organizing and spawned a considerable amount of labor unrest, particularly in auto, rubber, mining and steel industries. The law spurred the establishment of the Congress of Industrial Organizations within the American Federation of Labor. While the AFL organized people by skill and craft (like metal polishing, cigar makers, upholsters, sheet metal workers), the CIO wanted to organize all workers - skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled - in an industry into one union. The law was set to expire in June 1935. Before it did, the Supreme Court found the law unconstitutional on May 27, 1935 in the *Schechter Poultry v. US* case. The Wagner Act, or National Labor Relations Act passed in July 1935, replaced it.

In World War II, Colt's workforce grew to 16,000 in 3 factories with 3 shifts, 24 hours a day. "However, the company lost money every year due to mismanagement, embittered workforce that had been stretched to its limits, and manufacturing methods which were becoming obsolete."

Both the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations tried to organize the workers. In 1941, the United Electrical workers, part of the CIO won collective bargaining rights through to 1948.

In 1948, as the House Un-American Activities Committee forced union leaders to swear to not being a Communist, UE leaders refused. The UAW, an AFL affiliate, came in and took over from the UE through a vote.

1935 strike 13 week unsuccessful strike

1941 recognition of union and 1 ½ day strike

1948 switch from UE to UAW

Look at the first two documents in the [Google Slides presentation](#) to see 19th-century depictions of the factory.

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How To

Classroom Setup

Students will brainstorm in small groups using charts, primary sources to answer the supporting and compelling questions. They should have access to the internet.

Activity 1

Students will brainstorm in small groups about what makes a good/bad job. They will report out to the larger group. Use the following prompts:

- What conditions would you like in your place of employment?
- What conditions would make you dislike your place of employment?

Possible Answers

- *Factors that give a worker power in the workplace:* Control pace, make a product, pride, have breaks, control the pace of work, having a skill, reasonable hours, good pay, way to channel grievances to employer
- *Factors that take away power in the workplace:* Don't control the pace of work, make only a small part of the product and never

see final product, no breaks or talking to co-workers, dangerous, too close supervision, hours too long, wages too low

Activity 2, Analyzing a Photograph in Small Groups

Study the photograph taken of women workers at Colt's Firearms during World War I. What makes this job look like a good one? What would be difficult about this job?



General view of a section of the Colt's automatic firearms plant in Hartford, where many American women took the places of men who had joined the services, April 1918. [Connecticut State Library](#)

Activity 3

Ask students: if a worker's working conditions are not good, what are his or her choices?

Record answers that reflect the following and more:

1. Quit and get another job

2. Grin and bear it
3. Complain directly to your employer with fear of being fired
4. Join together with other workers in a group to form a union that will collectively bargain with their employer

Activity 4

Read about the history of Colt's Firearms in Hartford from the historical context above and from primary and secondary sources provided in the links in the table below. Look at the first 3 primary sources in the [Google Slides presentation](#). What factors helped give workers power? What factors gave employers power? Why did the workers want to join a union?

In the chart below you will find 15 factors which can aid the workers, the employers, both or neither. Give reasons why you think this factor helps or hurts in the boxes. Sources for information are linked to the factors.

1	Context of the Strike	Helps Workers Unionize	Gives Power to Owners
2	Government Intervention - Section 7-A and Wagner Act		
3	Unemployment Rate		
4	Low Unemployment		

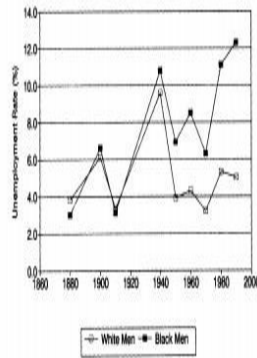


FIGURE 1. UNEMPLOYMENT RATES BY RACE

5 The Press

6 Ethnic groups who could not speak English

7 Women workers who did not get paid as much as men

8 [Company union](#) - Organization for workers established by the company

9 Craft Union - Union in which skilled workers band together for better hours, pay and working conditions

10 Industrial Union - All workers in the same industry belong to the same union

11 **Paternalism and the**
[Company Town](#) - the
employer provides
services: housing,
sports

Leagues - Musical
bands for the
workers

12 **Fair Labor**
Standards Act - sets
minimum wage at 40
cents per hour 1938

13 **Patriotism**

14 [House Un-American](#)
[Activities Committee](#) -
Rooting out
Communists in
unions

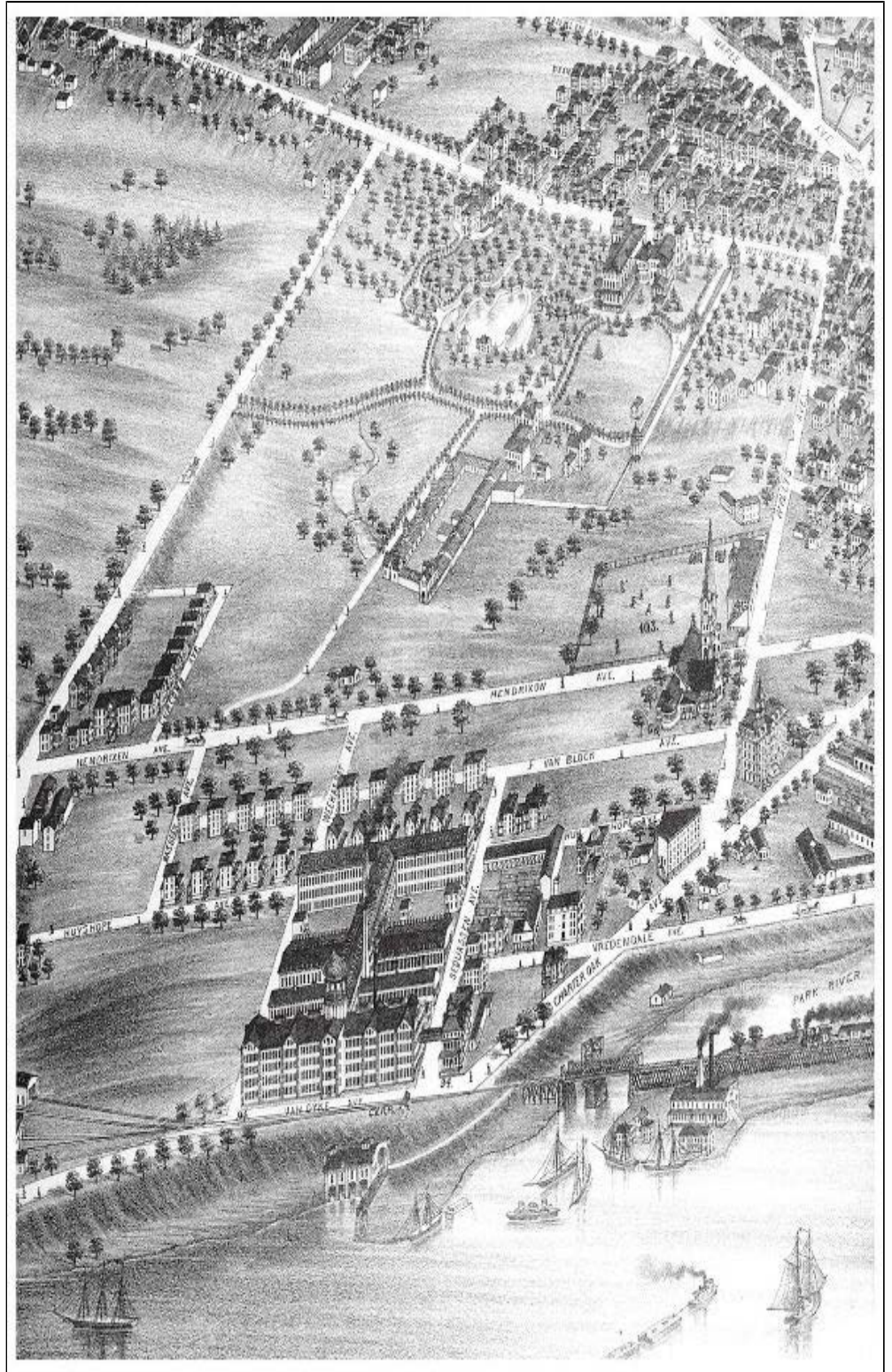
15 **Globalization**

Activity 5



Analyze the photograph “Strike at the Colt’s Firearms factory.” What are these strikers, who are in Washington, D.C. thinking caused this strike? In your research, how important a role does the government play in workers’ rights? This is [slide 5 in the Google Slides presentation](#).





A bird's-eye view of "Coltsville," 1877. This industrial village along the Connecticut River in Hartford included Samuel Colt's famous onion-domed factory (foreground), and behind it, workers' housing, a baseball field, and a church. To the right of the armory and below the church is Charter Oak Hall, where workers could engage in numerous leisure activities. A detail from the lithograph "City of Hartford" (1877)

by O. H. Bailey, courtesy of The Connecticut Historical Society.

To use Katz and Wagner's language, the Colt Armory was the "anchor firm" of the Hartford "innovation district," which grew to include the Weed Sewing Machine Co., the Pope Manufacturing Co. (bicycles, automobiles), both the Underwood and Royal Typewriter companies, and Pratt & Whitney (machines tools), the last of which was a spin-off founded by two former Colt machinists. <http://invention.si.edu/rise-innovation-districts>

HARTFORD



Herald photo. Size

TALKING THE STRIKE over, in the early morning hours when the Colt walkout was born, the cameraman caught, left to right, Daniel Saunders, Sid Gunning and Ray Trial. Representing one department, they were part of a group of seven that presented grievances to the management.

THE BEGINNING OF LOCAL 270, UE

Men and women picketing in front of the FBI office in Washington DC,

May 23, 1935, protesting the lack of Federal action in the strike at the Colt Firearms plant in Hartford where the machine guns of the Federal officers are manufactured.

1935, Strike 13 weeks, Unsuccessful

1941, Recognition of Union and 1 ½ Day Strike

1948, Switch from UE to UAW

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What's Next

Informed Action:

1. Find out if there are attempts to unionize around you. What are the issues? How do they compare and contrast to that of the Colt's workers in 1935? 1941? 1948?
2. Research the Colt's strike 1986-1990. What happened and which of the factors above were important in causing the strike and in ending the strike?

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The Strike at Colt's The Hartford Courant (1923-1991); May 14, 1941; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Hartford Courant, p. 10.

Colt's Strike Is Settled Firm's Offer Accepted Return To Work Today: ... The Hartford Courant (1923-1991); May 15, 1941; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Hartford Courant pg. 1.

Connecticut State Library. ["Strike of 1935 - Recreation for Workers."](#) Flickr, Yahoo!, 18 Nov. 2009.

["PLAN TO END COLT TIE-UP.; Strike Chief Submits 4-Point Program to Governor Cross."](#) The New York Times, The New York Times, 29 Apr. 1935.

["Strike of 1935 - Dining Hall for Workers."](#) CONTENTdm,

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