

MT. 4, CT. 1 - A Attacks on Civil Liberties

Labor Unions

The 1920s would be a challenge for workers and members of labor unions. During World War I, workers rights were limited. Their wages were frozen and they were not allowed to go on strike. When the war ended, government agencies removed their controls from the economy. The result was rapid inflation. Inflation greatly increases the cost of living – the cost of food, clothing, shelter, and other things people need to survive. Many workers, especially those who belonged to unions, wanted an increase in wages to deal with the higher cost of living. In the 1920s, steelworkers, police, and others went on strike for better pay and working conditions. Business owners, with the support of the government, were determined to prevent these strikes and break the power of the labor unions.

The first major strike took place in Seattle when 35,000 shipyard workers demanded higher wages and shorter hours. Soon, other unions in Seattle joined the shipyard workers and organized a general strike. A general strike involves all workers living in a certain location, not just workers in a particular industry. The Seattle general strike involved more than 60,000 people. The workers actions worried many Americans. The general strike was a common tactic used in Europe by Communists and other radical groups. These general strikes often led to revolutions and violence. As a result, owners blamed strikes on Communists or “Reds” and used force to stop them. Many strikers were killed or injured in clashes with the police.

One of the most famous strikes took place in Boston. In 1919, 75 percent of the police force walked off the job. The results were riots and looting throughout the city. In response, the Massachusetts governor, Calvin Coolidge, fired the striking police officers and hired a new police force. He said that, “There is no right to strike against the public safety.”

Another strike that turned violent was the Steel Strike. More than 350,000 steelworkers went on strike for higher pay and shorter hours. Since many steelworkers were immigrants, companies blamed the strike on foreign radicals. There were often violent clashes between company guards and strikers. In Gary, Indiana, a riot left 18 strikers dead.

Palmer Raids

The wave of strikes in 1919 led many Americans to believe that Communists were conspiring to start a revolution in the U.S. During the war, Communists had seized power in Russia, and many feared that the same thing could happen in the United States. Americans blamed Communist ideas for the labor unrest and violence. This fear that Communists, or “reds”, might seize power led to a nationwide panic known as the Red Scare.

In April of 1919, the postal service intercepted more than 30 packages addressed to leading businesspeople and politicians. The packages contained bombs that were set to explode when opened. In June, eight bombs in eight cities exploded within minutes of one another. Most people believed that the bombings were the work of Communists or other revolutionaries trying to destroy the American way of life.

As a result of these attacks, attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer and others feared there was a conspiracy to overthrow the U.S. government. Palmer ordered raids in which thousands of suspected communists, socialists, and anarchists were arrested. Many of these people did oppose the government, but hadn’t violated any laws. Many of those arrested were recent immigrants. More than 500 of these immigrants were deported without a trial. The Palmer Raids often ignored the civil liberties of suspects. Police officers entered homes and offices without search warrants. People were mistreated and jailed for long periods of time. They were not allowed to talk to their lawyers. These raids failed to produce any evidence of a revolutionary conspiracy.

Immigration Quotas

After World War I, there was another huge surge in immigration to the United States. The majority of these immigrants came from southern and eastern Europe. Many Americans saw immigrants as a threat to stability and order. They believed immigrants brought radical ideas such as communism and blamed them for the strikes and other violence. Nativists also feared that immigrants would take jobs away from Americans, especially the 4 million returning U.S. soldiers who needed work.

As a result, immigrants often faced prejudice and discrimination. One famous case of this was the Sacco and Vanzetti trial. Sacco and Vanzetti were two Italian immigrants who were accused of robbery and murder. They were also anarchists, people who opposed all forms of government. Although no one at the time knew if they were guilty, many people believed they were because they were Italian immigrants and anarchists. Sacco and Vanzetti were eventually convicted and sentenced to death. Many people viewed this case as an example of prejudice against people based on their ethnic origin and political beliefs.

In response to Nativist fears, the government eventually began creating quotas, or limits, on the number of immigrants who could enter the country each year. In 1921, the Emergency Quota Act established a temporary quota system limiting immigration. These quotas discriminated heavily against people from southern and eastern Europe. Ethnic identity and national origin determined admission to the United States. In 1924 the National Origins Act made immigrant restriction a permanent policy. This act effectively halted immigration from southern and eastern Europe and limited the total number of immigrants to 150,000 per year.

The Ku Klux Klan

The 1920s also saw a big increase in racist beliefs and attitudes. During this period, there was a strong belief in the "superiority" of the white race. One result of this was an increase in the popularity of groups like the Ku Klux Klan. The KKK had originally been formed after the Civil War to terrorize and intimidate recently freed African Americans. After the Red Scare and the rise in anti-immigrant feelings, the Ku Klux Klan was organized again. This time, the Klan would target other groups they believed represented "un-American" values. This included attacks against Catholics, Jews, immigrants, and other groups. The Klan believed their organization was fighting for "Americanism".

As a result of this broader appeal, membership in the Ku Klux Klan increased greatly in the 1920s. Membership in the Klan reached nearly 4 million by 1924. Membership also spread beyond the South into Northern cities and the Midwest. The Ku Klux Klan was even able to take control of state governments. In many Southern and Midwestern states, the governors and a majority of the state legislators were Klan members.

The growth of the Klan also led to an increase in violence against African-Americans and other ethnic groups. The lynching of African-Americans continued in the South. Recent immigrants also faced violent attacks from the Klan.