

Striking Back

Are there parallels between the great post-WWII strikes and today's Great Resignation?

IT STARTED JUST THREE WEEKS after the end of World War II, with thousands of workers staging a walkout in the usually bustling New York City commercial districts. Telegraphic communications, mail, and railway deliveries came to a standstill, and federal tax collections plummeted by \$8 million a day.



Meanwhile, newspaper headlines across the country told similar stories—a weeklong national labor unrest that was just part of what has been called the largest worker strike in US history. All told, from September 1945 to the end of 1946 more than 4.6 million workers nationwide walked out of their jobs, demanding increased wages and fair work policies.

Much of the unrest was the product of a hectic postwar economy, with millions of men returning to the labor force at once and inflation running high. But some experts say the so-called Great Strikes of 1945–46 also stemmed from a deep-seated resentment that arises between employees and companies during crisis times such as wars—and pandemics. According to Ileene DeVault, a labor-history professor at Cornell University, most unions had agreed to cooperate with the government and firms during the war by accepting wage freezes and pledging not to strike. After the war, a lot of higher-paying overtime work disappeared, but wages didn't rise to compensate, she says. "So what you've got are a lot of workers who have been paying high wartime

prices, putting up with life under the war, which was not pleasant. They were really determined that they deserved payback for everything that they had done during the war."

In the end, the government intervened and the workers came back, receiving some increased wages and benefits. But a year later, labor took a big hit when Congress passed the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act, which banned secondary or sympathy strikes. Supporters of the act argued that a rebalancing was needed because workers were gaining more power than employers, says DeVault.

Today, of course, instead of a nationwide strike, companies are facing the so-called Great Resignation, with millions of disgruntled or burned-out workers simply leaving their jobs. To slow the exodus, smart companies are responding swiftly with better pay and benefits. Still, DeVault sees some keen parallels: "The current reaction of workers to the pandemic is that sense of 'I have sacrificed for years now, and I am going to demand what I feel I deserve.'" ▀

PAST STRIKES OF NOTE

1912: Two strikers were killed after immigrant workers protested pay cuts and poor conditions at the Everett Mills in Lawrence, Mass., leading to a congressional hearing and improvements.

1970: President Richard Nixon called in the National Guard to try to ship mail after 200,000 postal workers walked off their jobs for eight days. Most demands were met.

1981: In a major blow to the labor movement, President Ronald Reagan fired 11,000 striking air traffic controllers who wanted better conditions and a shorter workweek.