

Free Speech in America

We have the right to free speech in America. Free speech means you can talk to people about anything and you will not go to jail. Since 1787, the right to free speech has been in the Constitution – the highest law in the country. But for more than 100 years, the US government arrested many people for saying what they believed. For a long time, if you said something the government didn't like, the police could put you in jail. This happened when people spoke out against wars or big companies. Union members changed this in 1909.



Workers around the country were *frustrated* and angry. A few Americans were *extremely* rich, and many were extremely poor. A union called the *Industrial Workers of the World* (IWW) wanted to change things. They wanted everyone to join one big union. They wanted workers to control businesses and the government.

Bosses and the government hated the IWW. In 1909, the IWW was *organizing* workers in Spokane, Washington. The workers in Spokane were very interested in them. But when IWW organizers spoke to workers, the police arrested them.

The workers and IWW had an idea. They put a box on the street in Spokane. A worker would stand on the box and start talking about the union. The police would *immediately* arrest them. Another worker would immediately stand on the box and talk about the union. The police would arrest that person, too. This continued until the police arrested 500 people - and killed four more.

The police put all 500 people in jail. The city had to give them food, which was extremely expensive. Finally, the police stopped arresting people for talking about the union. The IWW did the same thing in Fresno and Stockton, California.

Sometimes we have rights on paper, but we don't have them in our lives. For over 100 years, the right to free speech was in the Constitution. But the police could arrest you for saying something they – or politicians, or bosses – didn't like. The members of the IWW changed all that. For about 20 years, they were the most important union in the country.

Vocabulary

1. *extremely* – adverb – Very much. “I was extremely angry when I lost my job.”
2. *frustrated* – adjective – How you feel when you want to do something and you can't.
3. *extremely* – adverb – Very much. “I was extremely sad when my dog died.”
4. *industrial*- adjective – About factories. “We have less industrial jobs in America today.”
5. *organize* – verb – When you teach people about a problem and help them fix it, or when you get people to join a union. “We need to organize the workers at my restaurant.”
6. *immediately* – adverb – Started right away. “I immediately answer all my phone calls.”

Questions

1. Why is free speech important?
2. Why do you think the police arrested the IWW organizers in Spokane?
3. The workers and IWW in Spokane used “direct action.” They believed the law was wrong, and broke the law to change it. Do you think it’s ok to break a bad law?
4. Should everyone have free speech? Who should not?

The First Amendment of the Constitution

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

1. ”Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof”
The government will not make a law for everyone to be the same religion, or make it illegal to be any religion.
2. “abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press”
The government will make no law to stop people from saying anything they want to each other, or to make it illegal for the news to say anything.”
3. ”the right of the people peaceably to assemble”
The government will make no law to stop people from meeting together.
4. “to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”
The government will make no law to stop people from telling the government they must change what the country is doing.