

# Labor unions and their struggles essay example

[Literature, Russian Literature](#)



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## **National Labor Union**

The first National Labor Union (NLU) which spread across the United States was first organized in 1866. The total workers were approximately 200, 000. William Sylvis was the energetic pioneer who felt the time was right for a national union. The NLU had ambitious goals, more than higher wages and good, safe working conditions they also had political goals. Unskilled labor and farmers were part of the union that is unless they were African-American. The racism of the day was stronger than sensibly organizing as many workers possible into one workers' union. The goals and the membership characteristics of the NLU were varied and covered a wide spectrum. Unfortunately in 1873 the economic panic weakened the Union and it was not able to regain its strength after that.

## **Knights of Labor**

[We shall] embark in a system . . . which will eventually make every man his own master – every man his own employer, a system which will give the

laborer a fair proportion of the products of his own toil. It is to cooperation, then as the lever of labor's emancipation that the eyes of the workingmen and women are directed; upon cooperation their hopes are centered . . . There is no good reason why labor cannot, through cooperation, own and operate mines, factories and railroads. (Knights of Labor, 1869)

Radical changes for economic justice were included in the goals of the Knights of Labor. Knights of Labor became the most influential organization after the end of the NLU. It was begun by Uriah Stephens in 1869. All wage earners were able to join even women and African Americans because class was the characteristic that the members all had in common. The Knights adopted all the political goals of the NLU plus they supported public ownership of telegraphs, telephones and railroads. They also wanted to limit child labor and the numbers of new immigrants.

Thomas Powderly was the Grand Master Workman of the Noble Order of the Knights of Labor from 1879 to 1893. His main strategy was to include everyone who worked for a wage which meant that women, African-Americans, immigrants were as welcome as white native-born men. When he became the leader of the organization it had about 10, 000 members. By 1886 his leadership,

. . . at a time when employers and the public regarded labor associations with contempt, he helped to transform a weak and secretive boy of less than 10, 000 members into a powerful, public movement that effectively challenged corporate control at the workplace and the hegemony (power) of the two major parties at the polls. (Phelan, 2000, 1)

People blamed the Knights even though Powderly and most of the Knights of Labor were firmly against the use of violence. After the Haymarket Strike political and internal quarreling brought the Knights of Labor to an end. The controversy about labor unions became so exaggerated that anarchists and labor unions became linked in peoples' minds.

## American Federation of Labor

Economic betterment, today; tomorrow, in home and shop, was the foundation upon which trade unions have been built. . . . We have no ultimate ends. We are going on from day to day. We fight only for immediate objects – objects that can be realized in a few years. (American Federation of Labor, 1886)

The American Federation of Labor (AFL) was organized by Samuel Gompers when he was still in his twenties. Gompers had immigrated to the New York City from London with his family (Jewish cigar makers) when he was a teenager. A common assumption of union organizers has been that they are socialists, communists or anarchists especially after the Haymarket Strike. Gompers was definitely a capitalist yet he organized the AFL and was the president for many years.

The union was focused on meeting practical goals and was not inclusive as the Knights of Labor had been. The membership was not open to unskilled labors and did not adopt the wide variety of goals of the Knights of Labor. Gompers' rule of thumb was to "Keep it simple." The three fundamental goals of the organization were for (a) good wages, (b) good working conditions, and (c) and a shorter work week. Cigar makers, masons and hat

makers are examples of the membership and the other members joining were also skilled workers.

The union was ready and willing to boycott and to use the court system to gain justice. For example a boycott of Buck's Stove & Range Co. had been called to change the hours worked. The company had accused the defendants in the case of conspiring to limit their trade. Gompers and two other defendants had been charged (in a lower court) with contempt of court for violating an injunction that had been placed during the AFL's boycott. The Supreme Court took up the court case of *Gompers v. Bucks Stove & Range Co.* The Supreme Court overturned the lower court's decision.

The AFL was a national organization in 1900 with over 500, 000 members. When smaller groups went on strikes and/or boycotts the larger AFL organization supported those striking by helping out with lost pay for families and other ways. During the 1930s the Great Depression the membership was opened to unpaid workers.

## **Industrial Workers of the World**

The working class and the employing class have nothing in common. There can be no peace so long as hunger and want are found among millions of the working class to do away with capitalism. The army of production must be organized, not only for everyday struggle with capitalists, but also to carry on production when capitalism shall have been overthrown. By organizing industrially we are forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old. (Industrial Workers of the World, 1894)

The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) was a socialist organization working to bring workers together in order to gain their rights. The strategy of the IWW was to change the political program of the AFL and make it openly socialist. There was a bitter disagreement with some of the AFL leaders and Gompers on politicizing the AFL by adding socialism to its planks. This led to an 11 point Political Program being introduced for adoption at the December, 1894 AFL convention. The 10th plank was the most controversial within the union's leadership "The collective ownership by the people of all means of production and distribution" (Grob, 1961, 176).

Grob (1961) explains that Plank 10 was the most contentious with Gompers and other AFL leaders (the unionists) because they were capitalist and did not want the AFL to become an openly and indisputably socialist organization. The union members mainly voted approval of the eleven point program including Plank 10. The United Brewery Workers were openly supportive of "the sound principles of scientific Socialism" and the carpenters approved it with an amendment that the words "as the people elect to operate" be added. (Grob, 1961, 177). The bakers voted against it and the web-weavers wanted to remove Plank 10 and replace it with a land resolution (Grob, 1961, 177). Because of the positive voting for Plank 10 the unionists called for an amendment to be added "The ownership of by the people of all means of production and distribution by confiscation without compensation" (Grob, 1961, 179). The amendment was so controversial that Plank 10 was finally voted down.

## Conclusion

Workers still outnumber employers but today union membership is low due to economic downturn. Unemployment is high. In England the organization of socialists became the political party the Labor Party. In the United States the socialists were not able to gain the same traction. The capitalist leadership of the AFL was able to outmaneuver the introduction of socialism. That success by Gompers could have been the first signal of continued failure for the socialists (Grob, 2000, 182).

In 1935 the Committee for Industrial Organization was created within the AFL. That same year the Social Security Act was passed by Congress. In 1938 the Fair Labor Standards Act was passed establishing a minimum wage and the 40-hour work week. The goals of the AFL, the NLU and the IWW had been reached almost seventy years after William Sylvis first organized the NLU. Not only did the workers of 1935 benefit from the laws but people today are still benefitting whether or not they are union members. Good wages, safe and healthy working conditions plus a 40-hour work week are taken for granted but a lot of sweat and organizing were needed to make them happen.

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