

United auto workers union history essay



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Labor unions have been controversial since their inception. Employers want to ensure their companies make profits while overworking employees and paying workers low wages. More workers saw a need to unionize with the onset of the industrial revolution, especially in the automotive manufacturing industry. However, the economy hit a down turn during the Great Depression, union membership declined due to an increase in unemployment and companies going out of business.

With the election of Franklin Roosevelt, the economy began to turnaround with the National Recovery Act and the National Labor Relations Act. These new laws enabled membership to grow in the American Federation Labor (AFL), particularly within the automotive sector. Membership in the automotive section of the AFL grew at an expanded rate, causing the sector to have its own specialized unit. In 1935, the AFL chartered the United Auto Workers (UAW). The UAW had a major impact on the auto industry especially in Michigan, the civil rights movement and history. The UAW is also known for one of its presidents, Walter Reuther who had a profound impact in the City of Detroit.

The UAW has become one of the largest unions and is still making an impact on the auto industry and today's economy.

Introduction

Labor unions have had a major impact on American industries. Whether a person is pro or anti union, no one can deny the effect it has had. Unions came about to improve the lives of American workers. Working conditions in the United States seemed to be an issue since slavery. Having workers do

more with less seemed to be the growing theme; less pay, less job security and less benefits. This theme allowed employers to make profits, while the workers became under paid and overworked.

The economy during the 1850s brought about a need for national labor unions. Labor unions were a way for employees to unite and gain job security. “ Motor vehicle production had become the leading manufacturing industry by the end of the 1920s in term of the value of its product.” (Halpern, 1988). An industrial Union, Carriage, Wagon, and Automobile workers (CWAU) began organizing in the automotive factories.

The American Federation of Labor (AFL) was against the CWAU organizing in the factories. Against the wishes of the AFL, the CWAU continued to organize in the auto industry thus growing their membership tremendously, especially during World War I. Soon membership in the union began to dissipate due to an unfortunate event in the United States history, the crash of the stock market, which is known as the Great Depression.

The Great Depression in 1929 caught labor unions by surprise. Labor Unions and their leaders realized they were not equipped to deal with the effects of the depression. Union membership began to decline as unemployment skyrocketed, pay wages were decreasing and businesses were closing their doors. The solidarity and force of the union was quickly disappearing.

The New Deal

The Great Depression was a challenge for the world especially unions. Americans were looking for guidance and solutions to help them through this tough economic time. President Hoover did not appear interested in helping

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the poor and un-employed, so Americans elected Franklin D. Roosevelt to do the job. With Franklin Roosevelt as President, unions and workers had an ally once again. President Roosevelt implemented programs that began to turn America's economy around. The National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) was implemented to:

provide for the general welfare by promoting the organization of industry for the purpose of cooperative action among trade groups, to induce and maintain united action of labor and management under adequate governmental sanctions and supervision, to eliminate unfair competitive practices, to promote the fullest possible utilization of the present productive capacity of industries, to avoid undue restriction of production (except as may be temporarily required), to increase the consumption of industrial and agricultural products by increasing purchasing power, to reduce and relieve unemployment, to improve standards of labor, and otherwise to rehabilitate industry and to conserve natural resources. (NLRA, 1933).

The NIRA also allowed for organizing and collective bargaining without retaliation from employers. Another worker pro-union measure was the implementation of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). The purpose of the NLRB is to administer the National Labor Relations Act created in 1935. The National Labor Relations Act oversees the relationship between unions and employees, in addition to guaranteeing the right of employees to organize and collective-bargain with employers. The NLRB serves two functions:

(1) to determine, through [secret-ballot elections,] the free democratic choice by employees whether they wish to be represented by a union in dealing with their employers and if so, by which union; and

(2) to prevent and remedy unlawful acts, called [unfair labor practices,] by either employers or unions. (National Labor Relations Act Fact Sheet, 1933).

With the new Labor Relations law, workers saw a need for more independent unions, especially in the mass production industries. Workers in the auto industry soon began to organize and began to grow at a rapid pace. Union membership in the AFL began to increase by the thousands. Due to the number of members in the trade unions, the AFL could no longer deny having a separate union for autoworkers. Because of this need, the United Auto Workers (UAW) was created.

Origins

The UAW has been in existence for over 70 years. The American Federation of Labor (AFL) recognized that autoworkers needed to belong to their own union; thus chartering the UAW in 1935. The UAW had a difficult road ahead of them. The UAW began with opposition, not only from employers but also with its creators, the AFL. However, that did not stop the leaders of the UAW. The UAW and the AFL remained at odds with both having different objectives for the UAW. In 1936, the UAW joined the Committee of Industrial Organizations (CIO). The CIO consisted of workers within the coal mining, steel, electrical and clothing industries. This unity caused the AFL to separate from the UAW. However, the UAW remained a member of the CIO until the merger of the AFL-CIO in 1955.

The UAW had the largest impact in Michigan, in the Detroit area where they decided to locate their headquarters. The auto manufacturers', General Motors (GM), Chrysler and Ford also known as the " Big Three" had the majority of workers whom the UAW were trying to unionized. In December of 1936, the UAW staged its first strike with the workers at the GM factory in Flint, MI, " The Flint Sit-Down Strike". The purpose of this strike was to become the bargaining unit for the workers at GM, in addition to keeping work with the union workers. " Within two weeks, approximately 135, 000 men from plants in 35 cities in 14 states were striking General Motors. " (Baulch & Zacharias, 1997). General Motors refused to negotiate with the UAW, thus causing more protests and eventually a riot " The Battle of the Running Bulls". However, it appeared that both parties could not come to an agreement and GM refused to meet with the UAW.

President Roosevelt stepped in and encouraged GM to give the UAW another chance. On February 11, 1937, GM signed an agreement with the UAW. The UAW negotiated a five percent pay increase and GM would no longer discriminate against union workers. (Appendix)

The next challenge for the UAW was Ford Motor Company. Henry Ford had been very vocal about what he thought of the UAW. Ford took extraordinary measures to ensure that his plants would not see the same fate as GM. In 1937, as UAW organizers were distributing pamphlets outside of the gates at the Ford Rouge plant, henchmen hired by Henry Ford beat up and fired any one with union ties, including UAW leadership. This brutality became known as the " Battle of the Overpass". Ford's tactics worked against the company, it only brought about more support for the union and its workers. In April of <https://assignbuster.com/united-auto-workers-union-history-essay/>

1941, Ford workers went on strike in protest of the actions at Ford. The strike lasted for nine days in which was the biggest victory for UAW. The agreement called for competitive wages, a union shop, paid holidays, overtime pay and established grievance procedures.

Other key events in the UAW beginnings include the UAW taking a no strike stance during World War II. During World War II, women had to take an active role in taking care of the household, while their husbands were at war. At least 36 percent of women were in the workforce and at least 350, 000 of them were members of the UAW. The UAW had now become a voice for the people. No one knew just how much of a role the union would play in businesses.

Impact of the UAW

Detroit and Detroiters soon began to witness the impact the UAW had on the city and their lives. The union gave workers a sense of solidarity and bestowed on them a better living. Workers no longer experienced unfair treatment or uncertainty of job security. The union contracts gave a boost to Detroit's economy and upgraded the standard of living. Detroit and the auto industry would no longer be the same. Detroit was now a union town. Workers in other industries began striking following the example of the sit-down strike at GM. Not only were sit-down strikes happening in Detroit, they were also striking in other cities in Michigan and across the nation. The UAW has set the bar and workers were not going to let it fall.

Although, not everyone had the same love and admiration for the union and UAW in Michigan, some saw the benefits. The UAW also grew in other areas

of the industrial segment in Michigan. The UAW had gained the support from Governor Frank Murphy during the sit-down strike in Flint. This allowed the UAW to gain considerable grounds in Michigan and other states. More and more industries were becoming unionized and the world began to realize the power the UAW was having on the workforce. Not only was Detroit and union town, Michigan became a unionized states, which made it harder for other industries to not have unions in their organizations. Michigan economy and workforce has now become dependent on union negotiations.

The UAW began to shape the way unions did business. Not only did the union make major headways in the automotive industries by ensuring their workers were paid well and given top of the line benefits. The union had a greater vision, to shape American society. This vision is how the UAW became an integral player in politics. The UAW has strategically positioned lobbyists in Washington D. C. the unions objectives were met.

The UAW also played a pivotal role in the civil rights movement. The union negotiated contracts to ensure black workers were paid and treated fairly. “ In conjunction with African American groups, the union vigorously supported the administration civil rights program.” (Boyle, 1998, p 62). High-ranking members of the UAW participated in the march on Washington and were at the forefront walking along side Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Since the inception of the UAW, there was one person that was always in the forefront, stood behind the ideas of the UAW, and believed that the purpose of the union was not only to ensure that workers had better working

conditions but also a better life outside of work. Therefore, you cannot mention the UAW without mentioning Walter Reuther.

Walter Reuther

Walter Reuther's name became synonymous with the UAW. Walter Reuther was the thriving force behind the UAW and its movement to organize workers within the big three. He was one the union members that was beaten and attacked at the " Battle of the Overpass". Walter Reuther's rose to the top of the UAW came in 1937, when Walther Reuther accused Homer Martin, UAW president of being incompetent and provided no guidance for the union.

Walter Reuther became president of the UAW in 1946 and became the voice of the UAW. He was involved with aligning union contacts in D. C., in addition to setting up an office in Washington and has the workers report back to the headquarters in Detroit.

As Walter Reuther became the figurehead of the UAW, an assassination attempt was made on his life in 1948. However, the assassination attempt did not slow him down. Walter Reuther was affiliated with the Socialist party, however due to his being indebted to Michigan's Governor, Frank Murphy; Walter Reuther denounced the socialist party and began supporting the Democratic Party. Being affiliated with political parties became a hindrance to Walter Reuther; he no longer associated himself with any political party.

During the 1960s, the height of the civil rights movement, Walter Reuther and the UAW became big supporters and walked with Dr. Martin Luther King on the March on Washington. Walter Reuther said, " To make that the sole

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purpose of the labor movement is to miss the main target. The labor movement is about changing society”. Walter Reuther remained president of the UAW until 1970, when he and his wife died in an airplane crash in 1970. However, his legacy and impact on the UAW, Detroit, Michigan and the world will live on.

UAW Today

Karl Marx said, “ History repeats itself, first as a tragedy, second as a farce”. The stock market crash of 1929 changed the lives of many Americans and affected the unions adversely. Today, just as in 1929, the unions are taking a beating and being criticized due to the economic issues caused by the greed on Wall Street. The automotive industry has been hit the hardest financially. Chrysler and GM had to receive a government bailout in order to stay afloat. In the meantime, the thousands were lying off workers in the three companies (Ford, GM, and Chrysler). These massive layoffs have had a negative effect on the economy in Michigan, especially in Detroit. This was the last thing Detroit needed amidst the political scandal that was happening in the city.

Detroit was a different city in the beginning of the 20th century. Ten percent of the workforce was unionized. The city was experiencing an economic growth where workers in the manufacturing industry were being paid at least 33% more than counter parts in other cities. (Walters, 2010). Those days seem so long ago and will not be returning for workers in the automotive/manufacturing industry.

Membership and Recessions

The economic conditions in Michigan has caused the UAW to change the way the union conducts negotiation with businesses, especially Ford, Chrysler and GM. Since World War II, the UAW membership has not fallen below 500,000 members. (Associate Press, 2008). With membership steadily declining and the economy slowly bouncing back, the UAW has to restructure its business strategy. The union has to redefine their negotiation tactics, realizing the days of where workers are given the world are over. There must be give and take on both sides, if the “ Big 3” and the UAW want to survive.

In April 2009, the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) made an agreement with Chrysler to have the workers invest in their pension fund, while in Detroit, the UAW greed to give up the pension fund as a benefit for new employees starting at Ford, GM and Chrysler. (Keenan, 2009). Making these types of concessions in Canada and the United States, shows that UAW is doing what it can to assist in ensuring that both entities stay afloat.

In the June 2009 issue of Crain’s Detroit Business Director, Marick Masters, of the Douglas A. Fraser Institute for Workplace Issues at Wayne State University stated that the UAW has to come up with a different strategy and find other endeavors outside of automotive. In addition, the UAW must determine its place and finding better avenues for representing employees.

Hopefully, the UAW has learned from the past and realizes that it can no longer operate the same as it has done before. The days were workers in plants are the highest paid workers, especially in Detroit are over. Factories are becoming more automated being run by computers and robots, thus changing the skill sets needed for workers. A high school diploma just does

not cut it anymore. The UAW and its members must face the fact that workers must now have a set of specialized skills and they can no longer finish high school and go to work in the factory. In addition, to redefining the UAW, the mindset of its members' must also change. In order for the auto industry to survive the UAW has redefine itself and re-educate its members and Detroiters have to realize we cannot live by manufacturing alone.