

# The history of unions in america

[History](#)



The history of unions in America has seen a rich and contentious past. The Knights of Labor was the first major union in America, attracting nearly 750,000 members at the height of its popularity but did not have the lasting power to remain relevant in the American labor movement (Commanger, 1947, p 39) With the formation of the American Federation of Labor by Samuel Gompers in 1886, the American worker now had a strengthened voice when bargaining with their employers. However, this new founded power and influence would not come easily.

The Pullman Strike of 1894 as well as the tragedy at the Triangle Shirtwaist factor in 1911 showed to the plight that the American worker had still to overcome.(Burns, 1999) This occurred at a time when the exploitation of the American worker was at its height. Millions of unskilled immigrants were coming from Central and Eastern Europe, not being able to speak the language and consenting to any job that they were willing to obtain.

The formation of the U. S. Department of Labor in 1913 and the Clayton Act of 1914 helped recognize the importance and influence that the American worker had on the economy of the country, and therefore, its future success. (Commanger, 1947, p. 78) The AFL would further increase its power with the 1955 merger of the other great labor union in America, the Congress of Industrial Organizations or the CIO, formed by labor leader John L. Lewis. Together, they were able to pool their resources and collective strength and now, there are nine million members of the AFL- CIO and up until the last decade, their power in collective bargaining for its workers had been strong but now face new and daunting challenges into the new century.

The history of trade unions can be found as far back as in the lives and ideology of the Pilgrims and Puritans of the early 17th century. It was they who gave to this country, the idea of hard work being a virtue and a reward from God and that a strong work ethic, or Protestant Work Ethic; a term given to American culture by Sociologist Max Weber in 1905 to explain the affluent society that America was now able to offer.

During this time and into the American Revolution, unions of various workers, from craftsmen to cabinet makers and cobblers constituted very primitive, but existing unions which were designed to help protect the interest of the worker over the merchant and ruling classes. One of the first notable strikes in American history was the 1774 New York strike of printers who lobbied for higher pay and shorter hours. There were strikes in Philadelphia in 1776 and in Boston in 1799; all over some of the most basic rights that the workers felt that they were entitled to under the "pursuit of happiness" clause in the Constitution.

These efforts to organize were mostly ineffective but most importantly, reflected the need and desire for the worker to have his rights protected against the exploitation of the ruling and merchant class. The exploitation of the worker, as is seen today, is simply not just one receiving a low wage but any wage that is in disproportion to the amount that his services is worth.

The first union seen in America was the Nation Labor Union in 1866. (Gillian, 1998. p. 87) The Union was able to persuade Congress to pass an eight hour work day law for federal workers. The law would require a great deal of expanding if it were to meet the requirements of the other 99% of America's workers. This would not be seen until the start of the 20th century, but as it

<https://assignbuster.com/the-history-of-unions-in-america/>

is the case with most things in history, progress made today, was steeped in the struggles of the past. The labor union was no exception.

The Knights of Labor was formed in 1869 and was the first major union with a lasting power in American history. At its peak, the Knights of Labor boasted a membership of 750, 000. This was because there were no restrictions put on the membership of white and black, male and female and skilled and unskilled workers.( Commanger, 1947. p. 39)

Terrance Powderly and the Knights, for the brief time that they were able to remain organized, remained a political force in the country. However, due to the rift that was being caused by skilled and unskilled workers as well as the riot in Haymarket Square in 1886 Chicago, the influence of the Knights declined steadily.(Miller, 2001, p. 178) One that was to replace the influence of the Knights, the American Federation of Labor, was able to eclipse the power and influence of all labor unions that have come before and with the merger with the Congress of Industrial Organizations in 1955, all labor unions in America since.

The American Federation of Labor, founded by Samuel Gompers in 1886, remains the most important union in America, 120 years after it was first founded.(Johnson, 2001) Gompers, who first became involved in the struggle for equality among the workers, was a leader of his local union and of the national Cigar Makers Union. While working in the cigar shops, in order to escape from the boredom of the job, began to read and educate himself on all aspects of trade, the past exploitation of the worker and how it would be to organize these same workers in order to collectively pool, the strengths of the workers in this country.

<https://assignbuster.com/the-history-of-unions-in-america/>

Also, the industrialization of America, as being a direct contributor of the Industrial revolution, now had a surplus in the demand for unskilled labor, designed only to feed and operate the machines that monotonously turned out the product on a much wider scale than ever previously imagined. This is represented in an aspect of the mission statements of the AFL. " The various trades have been affected by the introduction of machinery, the subdivision of labor, the use of women's and children's labor and the lack of apprentice system-so that the skilled trades were rapidly sinking to the level of the pauper labor." (Johnson, 2001) The AFL later declared: " To protect the skilled labor of America from being reduced to beggary and to sustain the standard of American workmanship and skill, the trade unions of America have been established." (Peters, 1991 p. 328) This remained their mission statement, even into their merger with the CIO in 1955.

One of the first representations of the need for such a union was in the 1894 Pullman Strike on the south side of Chicago.(Jones, 1972 p. 462) This was the second largest strike in the 19th century and one that at the start of the strike, had a lot of promise regarding the possibility for change. Even though the strike was not directly related to the AFL, it showed the hopelessness and powerless pessimism that the workers had regarding their inability to collectively bargain for what they felt was their due rights.

The Pullman Company was involved in the building of Pullman sleeper cars for the railroad companies. The workers were not paid in American dollars but in script in order to buy their needed supplies at the company stores and pay rent for the housing to the company as well. " When George Pullman lowered wages in relation to the 1893Depression, yet did not lower the rents

or the prices at the stores, the workers went in strike. In response, the government swore in 3, 400 special deputies, President Cleveland called in the federal troops and the strike was put down with the workers gaining nothing that they had wanted.” (Jones, 1972 p. 464) The strike had turned out to be a complete failure for the workers.

The strike did serve as a victory for the government as injunctions were now being used with a greater frequency as an effective legal weapon against union organizing and strikes. Another event in American History that had tragic consequences but which led to the formation of a strengthened union in America was the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Company. This occurred on March 25, 1911.(Burns, 1999) Many strikes, some led by the AFL, were being organized all across the city of New York.

Their demands were the result of the exploitation of the immigrant workers, mostly women and children who were being exploited to a degree than a modern American society would find hard to comprehend. A strike which failed in its objectives, had transpired in the immediate weeks before the fire. As a result of the attempted strike, the factory owners locked the doors to the factory and covered up the windows as to eliminate the number of distractions to the immediate work of the immigrants as well as a lesser ability to discuss and organize another strike. Only twenty minutes before the workers were to go home, a fire broke out on the 8th floor of the factory.

The workers were trapped and instead of being burnt up in the fire, many chose to jump to their deaths. Women held the hands of their co workers, shut their eyes and jumped together, only to bounce off the pavement, dead!” (Burns, 1999) This horrific event led to the formation of the U. S.

<https://assignbuster.com/the-history-of-unions-in-america/>

Department of Labor in 1913 and the Clayton Act of 1914.(Byrne, 2006) Both of these were formed at the request and influence of the AFL which was then enjoying an increase in their strength and authority among the political circles.

This is due to the fact of the greater industrialization of the American economy as well as a mass influx of immigrant workers coming to America from Central and Eastern Europe in order to escape oppressive economies and societies within their former homes. Many of these workers did not speak English as did many of the former mass influx of immigrants do in the middle of the 19th century and who had become established at this time. A large majority of these workers were unskilled laborers, thus had even less power and influence to bargain on an individual basis with the improvement of their individual rights before the passage of the Clayton Act.

Therefore, the AFL had a now greater ability to influence for the betterment of its members, improved working conditions. The Clayton Act served as one of the most important pieces of legislation in the entire history of the American labor movement. The Act made it illegal to treat the worker as simply a commodity for financial gain above his worth as a human being.

This increased the social standing and importance of the worker but also, excluded him from the provisions of the Sherman Anti Trust Act which had served as the legal basis for injunctions against union organized strikes. (Commanger, 1947 p. section 3 p. 43) The Clayton Act also gave the right to the worker to peacefully protest, form strikes and boycotts and dramatically limited the use of injunctions in labor disputes. The 1st amendment to the Constitution had been long ignored when it said that a citizen had the right

<https://assignbuster.com/the-history-of-unions-in-america/>

to peacefully assemble. In the years leading up to the passage of the Clayton Act, the American worker was not allowed to peacefully assemble as their rights as seen in the Pullman Strike and in the prevention of any further strikes in the garment industry in New York City, was prevented. The importance of the Clayton Act was accurately detailed when AFL founder and President Gompers referred the act as the Magna Carta. It was indeed.

In the 1920's a decade that was seen as a time of great progress in American society, was a tougher time for the American industrial worker. The 1920's was a time when unemployment rose quietly and the American worker, especially the American farmer, found himself faced with the daily problem of having to feed his family from the product of his own labor. The post WWI era brought wages down sharply and the membership numbers for unions decreased sharply as the major unions lost nearly a million members from 1920-1923 (Keeler, 1982 p. 87)

Also, due to the scare that came over America, not to be bested until the 1950's, the fear that the Communist revolution, which had taken place in the Soviet Union in 1917, and feared infiltration into American industry, was the source for suspicion from the American public as they looked into the unions of that day. Strikebreaking and blacklisting of those who did strike or who talked or striking, was now seen as a patriotic defense of the country. " The yellow dog contract which workers had to sign in order to then be considered for a job by their employer, bound them to never join a union' at the same time, these large corporations promoted employees representation plans or company unions-pale and generally useless imitations of real unions." (Keeler, 1982 p. 91) In order to get a job, one had to be assured that they



had no ties to unions and fees that were paid under the table to the employer, was the only way in which one could hope to even be considered for employment.

The influence of the unions enjoyed resurgence when the AFL joined forces with the Committee for Industrial Organization, later known as the Congress for Industrial Organizations in 1938, or the CIO. With its colorful leader John L. Lewis, a former president of the Mine Workers Union in the years after WWI, actually led the fight in bitter attacks on many members and aspects of the AFL and their competing vision for trade unions in America.

The two organizations began to find common ground in the years during and immediately after WWII. Some of the old antagonisms were put aside and a merger was formed on December 5, 1955. An aspect of the mission statement as part of that historic day stated that the two organizations shared many of the same aspirations for the future of the American worker.:  
“ What labor wants ... is what the

American people want: honorable peace in the world, rising living standards at home and abroad, the human dignity that is the reward of economic progress, and the enjoyment of democratic liberties.” (McMillian, 1967 p. 232) The press at the time was also optimistic about the future of this historic merger: ““ No doubt about it, unity of labor will bring benefits all around--in closer relationships between international and national unions ... in organizing drives among the millions of workers in industries that are largely unorganized, improved legislation, more effective political activity, and extended work with other community groups--all of them are in the cards.” (McMillian, 1967 p. 235)

It was the design of the merger to pool together the collective strengths of the two unions, which at times, had formed a counterproductive and contentious relationship in the past as they both battled for an increase of influence in their own separate ideas of the future of labor in America. It was commented by the press that this merger might be helpful in the cessation of these quarrels. " Immediate effects of the merger will be to give the American trade union movement a single voice on political and legislative matters, instead of two separate and sometimes divergent voices,"(McMillian, 1967 p. 237) The merger gave the two unions, now one single union, and the largest number of members than any previous union in the history of the country. This, along with the growing power of the teamsters in the 1960's and 1970's and their colorful and sometimes controversial leader Jimmy Hoffa, the influence of the union, in both the lives of the worker as well as with politics, increased steadily over time.

The constitution of the AFL-CIO, as formed in relation to the merger, established seven different and separate departments. They are still in operation within the union. They are the Building and Construction Trades Department, the Food and Allied Services Trades, the maritime Trades and Metal Trades department as well as the Department for Professional Employees and the Transportation and Union Label Departments.

There are also non-profit, non partisan organizations that have since been included in the charter of the AFL-CIO. Some of these include, in order strengthening the diversity and membership of the union, the Black Trade Unionists and the Coalition of Labor Union Women. Some of the major function of these and other such groups is to lobby Congress, issue research reports

and publications and build coalitions in order to further strengthen the power of the union with other groups. The AFL-CIO is made up of a combination of 54 national groups including some in Canada as well. From 1955 until 2005, the AFL-CIO came to be the recognized voice of almost all unionized workers in America. However, in the most immediate years, the influence and power to collectively bargain has hit a major impediment in the steep decline of their members.

The future of the AFL-CIO is uncertain. As the organization prepared for its 50th anniversary celebration, three of the four largest unions announced that they would be withdrawing from the union. The Teamsters, which had always had a contentious relationship with the AFL-CIO left as well as the Service Employees International Union. The rifts, though seen as very personal, could not be salvaged as of yet and the future of the AFL-CIO as it continues to maintain the same level of power and influence as it did in the past, is being threatened.

Another sign of the times, and one that will not likely be reversed anytime soon, is the millions of jobs that have gone overseas to countries where unions are not allowed and the worker received pennies on the dollar of the wages of the American worker. In a way, the AFL-CIO is a victim of their own success. The improvements that they were able to give the American worker, mandatory healthcare from most companies, holiday and sick pay, overtime pay and a 40 hour work week have now negated themselves from many of the jobs that were once seen as bastions for the American worker but have now gone overseas by the millions.

Unfettered capitalism and the reluctance for Congress to place the restrictive tariffs on these goods, former inventions by Americans, the television, most aspects of the radio and automobile as well as dozens of various consumer goods which had their origins in America, even the American flag, are all built in underdeveloped countries where the worker has little protection from being exploited and where businesses can reap profits in the billions. The future of the blue collar American worker is in jeopardy and the AFL-CIO may end up being powerless to stop it.

#### WORKS CITED

Burns, R. ( 1999) The History of New York: Boston: PBS Video

Byrne, M (2006) America's Labor Movement. PBS: Boston

Commanger, H. S. (1947) Documents of American History. New York: Century Publishers.

Gillian, L. (1998) The Progressives Boston: PBS American Experience

Hoyt, A ( 2001) Chicago: City of the Century. Boston: PBS American Experience

Johnson, P ( 2006) The Supreme Court. Boston: PBS Video

Keeler, M. (1982) The History of the AFL. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

. Jones, R. (1972) The History of Labor: The Pullman Strike. New York: Premier Press.

McMillian, J. (1967) The Influences of the American Federation of Labor. New York: Simon & Schuster.

<https://assignbuster.com/the-history-of-unions-in-america/>

Negal, J ( 2001) The Progressive Movement. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press.

Miller. D. (2001) Chicago: City of the Century. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Peters, M. (1991) The Clayton Act. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press

Riis, J. ( 2001) How the Other Half Lives. New York: Simon & Schuster.