

Labor History in America 1842 through 2008

Formation of Labor Organizations.

- **Commonwealth v. Hunt (1842)**

This landmark decision by the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court was the first major judicial ruling dealing with a form of Labor Union that were referred to at the time as “Labor Combinations” **The landmark decision made a clear statement that such collective activity in these Labor Combinations were legal.**

In his ruling Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw ruled that labor combinations were legal provided that they were organized for a legal purpose and used legal means to achieve their goals. Ironically Shaw normally ruled strictly in favor of business so it was never made clear as to why he ruled in favor of the Labor Combinations as he did. Whatever Shaw’s motivation, his opinion in *Hunt* provided a clear statement that labor combinations, the front runners to labor unions, were lawful so long as they used legal means to achieve legal ends.

- **Labor Unions begin to form (1866)**

It would be 24 years after the landmark Commonwealth v. Hunt ruling in 1842 before **“Official” Labor Federations began to develop.**

- **National Labor Union - NLU (1865)**

The NLU was the 1st Labor Federation in the United States but lasted on 6 years and was dissolved in 1872.

- **The Regional Order of the Knights of St. Crispin (1867)**

This Order claimed 50,000 members by 1870, by far the largest union in the country. 1879 the Knights formally admitted women, who by 1886 comprised 10% of the union's membership, but it was poorly organized and soon declined.

- **Railroad brotherhoods (1870)**

Due to rapid growth and consolidation of large railroad systems after 1870, union organizations sprang up. The Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers (BLE), The Order of Railway Conductors, The Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen. **They were among the first unions to establish insurance and medical packages for their members and negotiating formal work rules that favored the membership, such as seniority and grievance procedures.**

- **The Knights of Labor (1869)**

The first effective labor organization in the United States that was not regional in their membership and influence was the Knights of Labor, organized in 1869. They believed in the unity of the interests of all producing groups and sought to enlist in their ranks not only all laborers but everyone who could be truly classified as a producer. The acceptance of all producers led to explosive growth after 1880.

Under the leadership of Terence V. Powderly they championed a variety of causes, sometimes through political ventures.

- **American Federation of Labor (1881)**

The Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions began in 1881 under the leadership of **Samuel Gompers**. Like the National Labor Union, it was a federation of different unions and did not directly enroll workers. The AFL's original goal was to encourage the formation of trade unions and to obtain legislation, such as prohibition of child labor, a national eight-hour day, and exclusion of Chinese and other foreign contract workers.

In 1886, as the relations between the trade union movement and the Knights of Labor worsened, Peter McGuire the co-founder of the Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America and many other Union Leaders called for a convention to be held at Columbus, Ohio on December 8th. The Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions merged with the new organization known as the American Federation of Labor or AFL, formed at that convention. **Samuel Gompers became the first president of the AFL and served in that roll until 1924.**

- **Women's Trade Union League (1903)**

The Women's Trade Union League was a support group that did not organize locals. Formed at the 1903 AFL convention and loosely tied to the AFL. It was made up of both workingwomen and middle-class reformers, and provided financial assistance, moral support, and training in work skills and social refinement for blue collar women. **Most active in 1907–1922 under Margaret Dreier Robins, it publicized the cause and lobbied for minimum wages and restrictions on hours of work and child labor.**

- **Congress of Industrial Organizations (1935)**

The Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) was as a federation of unions that organized workers in industrial unions in the United States and Canada from 1935 to 1955. Created in 1935 by John L. Lewis, who was a part of the United Mine Workers (UMW), it was originally called the Committee for Industrial Organization but changed its name in 1938 **when it broke away from the American Federation of Labor. It also changed names because it was not successful with organizing unskilled workers with the AFL.**

- **AFL and CIO Merger (1955)**

Perhaps the most significant event in the history of organized labor took place on February 8th, 1955 when a very amicable merger of the nations two giant labor organizations took place. The American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) became the AFL-CIO. This merger forever changed the face of union activity. This Unification would help the central organization fight corruption and to achieve the successful merger, they eliminated most of the more liberal policies of the CIO. **Walter Reuther, the CIO President went along with**

the compromises and did not contest the selection of George Meany to head the AFL-CIO.

Significant Events in Labor History

- **The Pullman Strike (1894)**

During a severe depression in 1883, the Pullman Palace Car Company cut wages as demand for new passenger cars plummeted and the company's revenue dropped. A delegation of workers complained that wages had been cut but not rents at their company housing or other costs in the company town. The company owner, George Pullman, refused to lower rents or go to arbitration. The plan was to force the railroads to bring Pullman to compromise. Debs began the boycott on June 26, 1894. Within four days, 125,000 workers on twenty-nine railroads had "walked off" the job rather than handle Pullman cars.

The Strike became a national boycott which caused Federal intervention when Under direction from President Grover Cleveland, the US Attorney General Richard Olney dealt with the strike. During the course of the strike, 30 strikers were killed and 57 were wounded. Property damage exceeded \$80 million.

In 1894, in an effort to conciliate organized labor after the strike, President Grover Cleveland and Congress designated Labor Day as a federal holiday. Legislation for the holiday was pushed through Congress six days after the strike ended. Samuel Gompers, who had sided with the federal government in its effort to end the strike by the American Railway Union, spoke out in favor of the holiday.

- **Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire (1911)**

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York City on March 25, 1911 was the deadliest industrial disaster in the history of the city, and one of the

deadliest in US history. The fire caused the deaths of 146 garment workers – 123 women and 23 men – who died from the fire, smoke inhalation, or falling or jumping to their deaths. Most of the victims were recent Italian and Jewish immigrant women aged 16 to 23. The factory was located on the eighth, ninth and tenth floors of the Asch Building in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of Manhattan. Because the owners had locked the doors to the stairwells and exits, a then common practice to prevent workers from taking unauthorized breaks and to reduce theft, many of the workers who could not escape from the burning building simply jumped from the high windows to their deaths.

The fire led to legislation requiring **wholesale changes in factory safety Standards, many of which are still in force today. This event also spurred the growth of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), which negotiated far better working conditions for sweatshop workers.**

- **Clayton Antitrust Act (1914)**

The Clayton Act specified particular prohibited conduct, the three-level enforcement scheme, the exemptions, and the remedial measures. The previous measure to address antitrust activity was the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890 which was heavily anti-Labor. An important difference between the Clayton Act and its predecessor, the Sherman Act, is that the Clayton Act contained safe harbors for union activities.

Section 6 of the Act exempts labor unions and agricultural organizations, saying **“The labor of a human being is not a commodity or article of commerce, and permitting labor organizations to carry out they’re legitimate objective”.** Therefore, **boycotts, peaceful strikes, peaceful picketing, and collective bargaining are not regulated by this statute. Injunctions could be used to settle labor disputes only when property damage was threatened”** This was considered landmark labor protection at the time.

- **Adamson Act (1916)**

The Adamson Act was a United States federal law passed in 1916 that established an **eight-hour workday**, with **additional pay for overtime work** for interstate railroad workers. The United States Supreme Court

upheld the constitutionality of **the Act in 1917 and the 8-hour day and the 40-hour work week became the National Standard.**

- **The Davis-Bacon Act (1931)**

The Davis–Bacon Act of 1931 is a United States federal law that establishes the requirement for paying the local prevailing wages on public works projects for laborers and mechanics. It applies to "contractors and subcontractors performing on federally funded or assisted contracts in excess of \$2,000 for the construction, alteration, or repair (including painting and decorating) of public buildings or public works". The act is named after its sponsors, James J. Davis, a Senator from Pennsylvania Davis–Bacon act was passed by Congress and signed into law by President Herbert Hoover on March 3, 1931. **The Act essentially prevents employers from importing cheaper labor from other regions of the country for these projects.**

- **Norris-La Guardia Act (1932)**

The Norris-La Guardia Act proclaims that yellow-dog contracts, which require a worker to **“promise not to join a union”**, are unenforceable, settling a long-standing dispute between management and labor. The law also limits the power to issue injunctions during strikes.

- **The Social Security Act (1935)**

The Social Security Act created Social Security in the United States, and is relevant for US labor law. It created a basic right to a pension in old age, and insurance against unemployment. Social Security Act was signed into law by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on August 14, 1935 **with its primary focus to provide aid for the elderly, the unemployed, and children.**

- **The Wagner Act (1935)**

Also referred to as the National Labor Relations Act, The Wagner Act was signed into law by President Franklin Roosevelt on July 5, 1935. **This**

landmark law established the National Labor Relations Board and addressed relations between unions and employers in the private sector.

- **CIO withdraws as a faction of AFL (1937)**

The Congress of Industrial Organizations splits from the American Federation of Labor over disputes about methods of organizing large industries. They had become a separate entity within the AFL just two years earlier. The CIO would continue to grow in stature and the two groups remained rivals until **merging back together as the AFL-CIO in 1955.**

- **The Flint Sit Down Strike (1937)**

The 1936–1937 Flint sit-down strike against General Motors (also known as the General Motors sit-down strike and the great GM sit-down strike) **changed the United Automobile Workers (UAW) from a collection of isolated locals on the fringes of the industry into a major labor union and led to the unionization of the domestic United States Auto Worker.**

- **The Fair Labor Standards Act (1938)**

A law drafted by Senator Hugo Black of Alabama and signed into law in June 1938, the FLSA was designed to “put a ceiling over hours and a floor under wages” by **establishing eventual maximum 40 weekly work hours, a minimum wage of 40 cents an hour by 1945, and prohibiting most child labor.**

- **The Great Strike Wave (1946)**

The strike wave of 1945–1946 was a series of massive post-war labor strikes from late 1945 to late 1946 spanning numerous industries and public utilities. In the year after V-J Day, **more than five million American workers were involved in strikes, which lasted on average four times longer than those during the war. They were the largest strikes in American history.**

- **Taft-Hartley Act (1947)**

Also referred to as the “Labor Management Relations Act” this legislation was enacted on June 23rd 1947 and is a **United States Federal Law that restricts the activities and power of labor unions**. The act, still in effective today, was sponsored by Senator Robert A. Taft and Representative Fred A. Hartley, Jr., and **became law by overcoming U.S. President Harry S. Truman's veto on June 23, 1947**; labor leaders called it the "slave-labor bill" while President Truman argued that it was a "dangerous intrusion on free speech," and that it would "conflict with important principles of our democratic society." Nevertheless, Truman would subsequently use it twelve times during his presidency. The Taft–Hartley Act amended the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA; informally the Wagner Act), which Congress passed in 1935. The principal author of the Taft–Hartley Act was J. Mack Swigert, of the Cincinnati law firm Taft, Stettinius & Hollister.

- **The Equal Pay Act (1963)**

The Equal Pay Act of 1963 is a United States labor law amending the Fair Labor Standards Act, aimed at abolishing wage disparity based on sex (see Gender pays gap). It was signed into law on June 10, 1963, by John F. Kennedy as part of his New Frontier Program.

The first thing to know is that, no matter how you slice it, there is a gender pay gap. Do men really make more than women? Yes. The gender pay gap is very real. But the best-known stat—that women earn 76 cents for every dollar earned by men (according to PayScale's latest data)—only tells part of the story. This stat is representative of the uncontrolled—or "raw"—gender pay gap, which looks at a median salary for all men and women regardless of job type or worker seniority. When looking at the uncontrolled gap, **it is true that the median salary for men is roughly 24 percent higher than the median salary for women**

- **The United Farm Workers (1966)**

As a result of the commonality in goals and methods, the NFWA and the AWOC formed the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee on August 22, 1966. This organization was accepted into the AFL-CIO in 1972 and changed its name to the United Farmworkers Union.

- **1972 Coalition of Black Trade Unionists (CBTU) formed**

The Coalition of Black Trade Unionists (CBTU) is a nonprofit organization of African American trade union members affiliated with the AFL-CIO. More than 50 different international and national trade unions are represented in CBTU and there are **50 chapters in the USA and one in Ontario, Canada.**

- **AFL-CIO Solidarity March (1981)**

On 3 August 1981, 12,500 air traffic controllers, members of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO), walked off their jobs with the Federal Aviation Administration. President Ronald Reagan vowed to fire the controllers if they did not return to work within 48 hours. On the first day of the strike 85 percent of union controllers were out. Two days later, Reagan fired the striking controllers -- 12,000 air traffic controllers were fired on August 5.

As a result of this action was a massive AFL-CIO's Solidarity Day march in Washington, D.C., in September 1981. This march came just a few weeks into the PATCO strike, and drew half a million-union people. The solidarity march was even bigger than the great 1968 march. In other ways the march was a new experience in post-war Washington. Because, though many groups and parties supported the demonstration, it was overwhelmingly an demonstration of organized labor. **It was the first major demonstration to have been organized for decades by the AFL-CIO.**

- **The UMW Pittston Coal Strike (1989)**

The Pittston Coal strike was a United States labor union action led by the United Mine Workers Union (UMWA) against the Pittston Coal Company, nationally headquartered in Pittston, Pennsylvania. The strike lasted from April 5, 1989 to February 20, 1990 and resulted from Pittston's termination of health care benefits for approximately 1,500 retirees,

widows, and disabled miners. The strikers also cited the refusal of the company to contribute to the benefit trust established in 1950 for miners who retired before 1974 and the refusal of the company to bargain in good faith as grounds for their action. The company cited declining coal prices, decreasing demand, and recession as its reason for limiting health care benefits.

The strike affected production in mines mostly in Virginia, but a few in West Virginia and Kentucky as well. Mine workers and their families engaged in acts of civil disobedience, work stoppage, protests, and rallies. At its peak in June 1989, the strike involved approximately 2,000 miners daily staying at Camp Solidarity with thousands more sending donations and holding wildcat walkouts that involved around 40,000 people. The participation of women in the labor action through the *ad hoc* formation of the *daughters of Mother Jones*—reminiscent of the early days of union organization—proved an essential element of the successful strike.

In February 1990, the Pittston Coal Company and the UMWA came to a settlement. The current miners of Pittston would receive health and retirement benefits once again. Pittston Coal Company also had to pay around \$10 million for the retirement benefits plan for pre-1974 miners. In return Pittston was permitted to operate seven days a week as long as They were closed from 8am–4pm on Sundays. Miners were also put on a rotating schedule where every 28 days they would work one week for 4 days, 10 hours each day. A major victory for Organized Labor.

- **Change to win Federation (2005)**

The Change to Win Organizing Center (CTW) is a coalition of American labor unions originally formed in 2005 as an alternative to the AFL-CIO. The coalition is associated with strong advocacy of the organizing model. The coalition currently consists of The International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT); Service Employees International Union (SEIU); and United Farm Workers (UFW). The United Automobile Workers (UAW) and Communications Workers of America (CWA) are affiliated with both CTW and AFL-CIO.

This Federation was an offshoot of the New Unity Partnership (NUP)

formed in 2003 to push reform in the AFL-CIO with a renewed focus on organizing workers. In 2005, the NUP formally dissolved and its five member unions, along with the Teamsters Union and the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), created a new coalition called Change To Win, which introduced a program for reform of the AFL-CIO.

- **AFL-CIO Union Veteran Council (2008)**

The Union Veterans Council was formed to bring working class veterans together to speak out on the issues that impact them most, especially the need for good jobs and a strong, fully funded and staffed Veterans Administration (VA). The UVC holds private enterprise and elected officials accountable for their words and actions. They believe wholeheartedly that the ability for someone to self-identify as “pro-veteran” isn’t determined by what lapel pin they don or what catchphrase they employ; veterans face real issues that require real actions—**constructive actions that lead to positive solutions. At the Union Veterans Council, they fight every day for those who have fought for us.**

Rising from humble beginnings Organized Labor in the United States since 1842 has been the most critically important in shaping the way all of us work, the hours we work, the off days we have, the holidays we have, the sick pay benefits we have and the vacations we all enjoy. Organized Labor has also established many safety protections that we work under even today.

Without the resolve of the great labor leaders over the past 150 years it’s difficult to imagine what the workplace might look like in 2024.

