

The LOCAL 1245 Union Primer

Part 4

Where did unions come from?

WORKERS DISCOVERED SOLIDARITY AS A MATTER OF SURVIVAL

Unions have been around since shortly after the American Revolution. As the numbers of wage-earners in the early republic grew, workers found they needed to form organizations to defend their common interests and advance their economic and political agendas.

Emerging from older craft structures like guilds, by the mid-nineteenth century working people were creating economic organizations (unions) and political organizations (workingmen's parties) to advocate for shorter work days, better pay, and such social changes as free public education for all.

With the Industrial Revolution, conditions for American workers were dramatically transformed. After the Civil War, the widespread development of industrial manufacturing fueled a steady movement off the land in rural America to the cities, and the conversion of small farmers, skilled craftsmen and urban artisans into workers in large-scale industries, where, after brief training, they tended machines. Even the language changed as this transformation occurred. Workers, reduced to a function in a workplace, became known as "hands."

This wasn't entirely a one-way process. A small number of master craftsmen were able to accumulate capital and move up to join the elite of industrial capitalists growing fabulously wealthy from these changes. But many more artisans, farmers, and village dwellers mourned the loss of their traditional ways of work and life.



Part of their unhappiness had to do with the demands of the industrial marketplace to standardize work processes and products. People were becoming less important than their function in the economic machinery. This was reflected in other problems, like the dangers to life and limb of industrial work.

Many workers viewed these problems politically: as industrial capital accumulated in the hands of the few, it concentrated power there as well, and eroded the democratic promise of the American Revolution for working people.



Samuel Gompers, the first president of the American Federation of Labor, said labor needed to "reward its friends and punish its enemies." Chicago Historical Society



Looking east from 14th Street in Pittsburgh after the great railway strike and riots, July 21-22, 1877. Pennsylvania State Archives

In 1877 workers acted collectively on a national basis for the first time. The great railroad strikes of that year demonstrated clearly to workers that the ability of "the monied interests"—corporations—to influence the course of events and to sway elected officials and the courts had to be matched by well-organized workers. Responding to the growing power of national corporations, local unions began to reach out to one another, forming national organizations as well.

Combined in the 1880s into the American Federation of Labor (AFL), these worker organizations sought "a fair day's work for a fair day's pay." Their principal means to achieve their goals was collective bargaining, but political action played a major role, too. In the view of longtime AFL leader Samuel Gompers, it wasn't appropriate for unions to align themselves with one or another political party. Instead, weighing each candidate and party on the basis of their actions on behalf of working people, labor should "reward its friends and punish its enemies."

In this period rose the call for an "eight hour day," so that workers and their families might have some time to spend together, and celebrate life with leisure. The union members had a slogan:

"Eight hours for work, eight hours for sleep, eight hours for what we will." At a time when ten and twelve hour work days were common, and six and even seven day work weeks, the push for an eight hour day was considered "radical" by employers and their anti-worker allies.

The fight for an eight hour day occurred alongside others: campaigns for unemployment insurance, workers' compensation, health and safety laws, child labor laws, and more. With these battles, the new unions strove to bring fairness and dignity to the lives of workers and their families and communities.

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Pennsylvania boys in coal mine, 1911.
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