

The LOCAL 1245 Union Primer

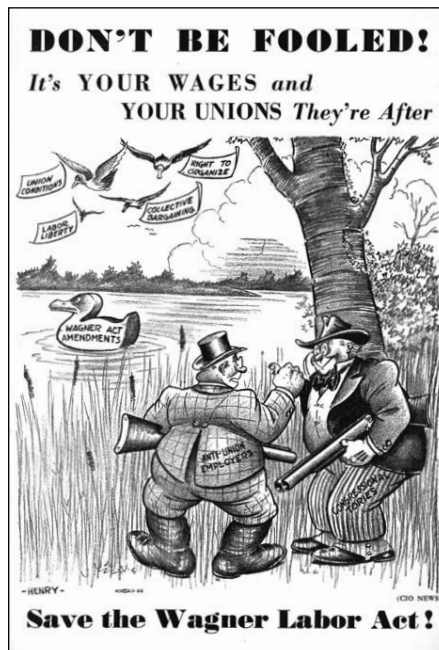
Part 5

Workers united in 1930s to gain new power

Throughout the late 19th and early 20th century, workers struggled against restrictive laws and the efforts of business owners and their organizations to discredit trade unionism. Employers usually used one of two strategies. Either workers and their organizations were painted as somehow “un-American” or subversive for opposing business interests; or their attempt at collective action would be accused of seeking to “kill the goose that lays the golden egg,” damaging business and workers alike.

Due to this employer opposition, it wasn't until 1935 that a federal law—the National Labor Relations Act, also known as the “Wagner Act”—passed Congress, finally giving workers the right to form unions and engage in concerted activities on their own behalf. (The 1926 Railway Labor Act created a federal law providing for collective bargaining, but only for the railroad industry.) “Collective bargaining” between workers and their employers became the law of the land, and remains so today.

Passage of the NLRA is but one part of the labor history of the 1930s. For a decade or so, an extraordinarily militant working class faced the harsh conditions of the Great Depression with a creative variety of tactics, including the use of marches, demonstrations, strikes, political action and above all, industrial union organizing. This was the approach of a number of unions that broke away from the AFL to form the Congress of Industrial Organizations, or CIO. Their new method of organizing insisted on inviting everyone in a large industrial workplace to join the same union at the same time, instead of one craft at a time in different unions, which had been the approach of the AFL. As a result, the new industrial unions became a civil rights movement, because they organized



everyone—whites and people of color, men and women, native born and immigrants—at the same time.

The origins of IBEW Local 1245 can be found in this Depression era militancy of working people. Emboldened by the passage of the NLRA, employees of Pacific Gas & Electric attempted to organize an industrial union in the late 1930s under the banner of the United Electrical and Radio Workers. But their efforts were thwarted when PG&E created a company-dominated union to compete with the real union.



San Francisco workers on the march during the San Francisco General Strike of 1934.

In 1939 the National Labor Relations Board ruled that PG&E's company union was illegal and ordered PG&E to cease interfering with union organizing efforts. This set the stage for the creation of IBEW Local 1245, affiliated with the American Federation of Labor, and the Utility Workers Organizing Committee, affiliated with the Congress of Industrial Organizations.

Both unions were dedicated to organizing a single union representing all PG&E workers, and competed fiercely for the right to do so throughout the 1940s. (A detailed history of this historic movement can be found at www.ibew1245.com/history-pages/historyPGEintro.html)

At PG&E and throughout the country, unions gained millions of new members. This growing labor movement became the backbone of progressive politics in the nation. Unions anchored the coalition that elected Franklin D. Roosevelt president for an unprecedented four terms.

Conscious of the enormous upsurge in unionization and worker activism in the 1930s, Roosevelt signed legislation creating the “New Deal,” which consisted of several laws. In addition to the NLRA, the most important laws for workers included the Social Security Act, which put in place a guaranteed minimum level of income for workers in their retirement; the Unemployment Insurance Act, which supported unemployed workers while they looked for work; and the Fair Labor Standards Act.

The FLSA set a minimum wage, declared the standard work day to be eight hours, and the standard work week to be forty hours. It regulated child labor, and mandated payment of time and a half (“overtime”) for work beyond 40 hours in a week. More than any other law, the FLSA is what's behind the bumper sticker that reads, “The labor movement: the folks that brought you the week end.”

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The FLSA passed over strident employer opposition. In testimony before Congress, one corporate spokesman claimed, “With the higher wages this law will force on business, it will be impossible for industry to offset costs.” Another warned, “We can see nothing but disaster resulting from this bill.”

Despite the overheated rhetoric, the United States economy failed to collapse after the FLSA's passage. Just the opposite occurred, in fact. Through higher wages and a shorter working day, consumer spending by millions of working families accelerated, fueling the growth of business and employment.

With these laws and policies, the New Deal addressed some of the most pressing problems that had been faced by workers for more than a century. Although often identified in the public mind with President Roosevelt, the New Deal was not the work of one man. Rather, it was the direct result of events such as the San Francisco General Strike, factory occupations by workers, sit-down strikes, and industry-wide organizing, all of which established workers' power as a social force to be reckoned with.



The union was still trying to get a foothold at PG&E when this photo was taken of a Placerville crew with a new 4-wheel drive truck in 1947. From left are Ralph Silva, foreman; Bill Smith, groundman; Robert Glasgow, lineman; Fred Yoeman, groundman; George Besse, groundman; Lonnie Evans, truck driver. IBEW 1245 Archive

This article is adapted, with permission, from “Work, Money and Power: Unions in the 21st Century,” a publication of the California Federation of Teachers and the UC Berkeley Center for Labor Research and Education. You can order a copy of the entire publication by calling the Labor Center at 510-642-0323.