

100 years of labor struggle



This brief history of the 100 years of the modern trade union movement in the United States can only touch the high spots of activity and identify the principal trends of a "century of achievement." In such a condensation of history, episodes of importance and of great human drama must necessarily be discussed far too briefly, or in some cases relegated to a mere mention.

What is clearly evident, however, is that the working people of America have had to unite in struggle to achieve the gains that they have accumulated during this century. Improvements did not come easily. Organizing unions, winning the right to representation, using the collective bargaining process as the core of their activities, struggling against bias and discrimination, the working men and women of America have built a trade union movement of formidable proportions.

Labor in America has correctly been described as a stabilizing force in the national economy and a bulwark of our democratic society. Furthermore, the gains that unions have been able to achieve have brought benefits, direct and indirect, to the public as a whole. It was labor, for example, that spearheaded the drive for public education for every child. The labor movement, indeed, has served as a force for American progress.

American labor's second century

Now, in the 1980's, as the American trade union movement looks toward its second century, it takes pride in its first "century of achievement" as it recognizes a substantial list of goals yet to be achieved.

In its first century, American labor has played a central role in the elevation of the American standard of living. The benefits which unions have negotiated for their members are, in most cases, widespread in the economy and enjoyed by millions of our fellow citizens outside the labor movement. It is often hard to remember that what we take for granted — vacations with pay, pensions, health and welfare protection, grievance and arbitration procedures, holidays — never existed on any meaningful scale until unions fought and won them for working people.

Through these decades, the labor movement has constantly reached out to groups in the American society striving for their share of opportunity and rewards... to the blacks, the Hispanics and other minorities... to women striving for jobs and equal or comparable pay... to those who work for better schools, for the freedom of speech, press and assembly guaranteed by the Bill of Rights... to those seeking to make our cities more livable or our rural recreation areas more available... to those seeking better health for infants and more secure status for the elderly.

Through these decades, in addition, the unions of America have functioned in an economy and a technology marked by awesome change. When the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions gathered in convention in 1881, Edison had two years earlier invented the electric light, and the first telephone conversation had taken place just five years before.

Yet through this dizzying process of change, one need remains constant — the need for individual employees to enjoy their human rights and dignity, and to have the power to band together to achieve equal collective status in dealing with multi-million and multi-billion dollar corporations. In other words, there is no substitute for the labor union.

Toward a Federation of Labor

The roots of our country's trade unions extend deep into the early history of America. Several of the Pilgrims arriving at Plymouth Rock in 1620 were working craftsmen. Captain John Smith, who led the ill-fated settlement in 1607 on Virginia's James River, pleaded with his sponsors in London to send him more craftsmen and working people.

Primitive unions, or guilds, or carpenters and cordwainers, cabinet makers and cobblers made their appearance, often temporary, in various cities along the Atlantic seaboard of colonial America. Workers played a significant role in the struggle for independence; carpenters disguised as Mohawk Indians were the "host" group at the Boston Tea Party in 1773. The Continental Congress met in Carpenters Hall in Philadelphia, and there the Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776. In "pursuit of happiness" through shorter hours and higher pay, printers were the first to go on strike, in New York in 1794; cabinet makers struck in 1796; carpenters in Philadelphia in 1797; cordwainers in 1799. In the early years of the 19th century, recorded efforts by unions to improve the workers' conditions, through either negotiation or strike action, became more frequent.

By the 1820s, various unions involved in the effort to reduce the working day from 12 to 10 hours began to show interest in the idea of federation — of joining together in pursuit of common objectives for working people.

Puny as these first efforts to organize may have been, they reflected the need of working people for economic and legal protection from exploiting employers. The invention of the steam engine and the growing use of water power to operate machinery were developing a trend toward a factory system not much different from that in England which produced misery and slums for decades. Starting in the 1830's and accelerating rapidly during the Civil War, the factory system accounted for an ever-growing share of American production. It also produced great wealth for a few, grinding poverty for many.

With workers recognizing the power of their employers, the number of local union organizations increased steadily during the mid-19th century. In a number of cities, unions in various trades joined together in city-wide federations. The National Trades' Union, formed in 1834 by workers in five cities, was an early attempt at countrywide federation — but the financial panic of 1837 put an end to its efforts. In 1866 several national associations of unions functioning in one trade — printers, machinists, stone cutters, to name a few — sent delegates to a Baltimore meeting that brought forth the National Labor Union. Never very strong, it was a casualty of the sweeping economic depression of 1873.

Five years later, the Knights of Labor captured the public imagination. The Knights were an all-embracing organization committed to a cooperative society. Membership was not limited to wage earners; it was open to farmers and small business people — everybody, that is, except lawyers, bankers, stockbrokers, professional gamblers and anyone involved in the sale of alcoholic beverages. The Knights achieved a membership of nearly 750,000 during the next few years, but the skilled and unskilled workers who had joined the Knights in hope of improvement in their hours and wages found themselves frustrated by the Knights' vague organizational structure, by its officers' aversion to strikes against employers and by its leaders' reliance on the promise of future social gains instead of the hard day-to-day work of building and operating a union organization. So the stage was set for the creation of a down-to-earth, practical labor federation which could combine long range objectives of a better society with the practical activity of day-to-day union functions.

Federation of Organized Trades & Labor Unions

The first practical step in response to the need for a united labor movement was a meeting of workers' representatives from a few trades and industries at Pittsburgh on Nov. 15, 1881. The delegates came from the carpenters, the cigar makers, the printers, merchant seamen, and the steel workers, as well as from a few city labor bodies and a sprinkling of delegates from local units of the Knights of Labor.

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