

The Rise of Industrial Unions

While the 1920s were years of relative prosperity in the United States, the workers in industries such as steel, automobiles, rubber, and textiles benefited less than they would later in the years after World War II. Working conditions in many of these industries did improve. Some companies in the 1920s began to institute "welfare capitalism" by offering workers various pension, profit-sharing, stock option, and health plans to ensure their loyalty. Still, shop floor environments were often hard and authoritarian.

The 1920s saw the mass production industries redouble their efforts to prevent the growth of unions, which under the American Federation of Labor (AFL) had enjoyed some success during World War I. They did so by using spies and armed strikebreakers and by firing those suspected of union sympathies. Independent unions were often accused of being Communist. At the same time, many companies formed their own compliant employee organizations, often called "company unions."

1. How did the mass production industries prevent the growth of unions?

Traditionally, state legislatures, reflecting the views of the American middle class, supported the concept of the "open shop," which prevented a union from being the exclusive representative of all workers. This made it easier for companies to deny unions

the right to collective bargaining and block unionization through court enforcement.

2. What is an open shop?

Between 1920 and 1929, union membership in the United States dropped from about five million to three-and-a-half million. The large unskilled or semi-skilled industries remained unorganized.

The onset of the Great Depression led to widespread unemployment. By 1933 there were over 12 million Americans out of work. In the automobile industry, for example, the work force was cut in half between 1929 and 1933. At the same time, wages dropped by two-thirds.

3. During the early years of the Great Depression, union membership grew.

- a. True
- b. False

The election of Franklin Roosevelt, however, was to change the status of the American industrial worker forever. The first indication that Roosevelt was interested in the well-being of workers came with the appointment of Frances Perkins, a prominent social welfare advocate, to be his secretary of labor. (Perkins was also the first woman to hold a Cabinet-level position.) The far-reaching National Industrial Recovery Act sought to raise industrial wages, limit the hours in a

work week, and eliminate child labor. Most importantly, the law recognized the right of employees "to organize and bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing."

4. What woman was appointed Secretary of Labor by Franklin D. Roosevelt?

John L. Lewis, the feisty and articulate head of the United Mine Workers (UMW), understood more than any other labor leader what the New Deal meant for workers. Stressing Roosevelt's support, Lewis engineered a major unionizing campaign, rebuilding the UMW's declining membership from 150,000 to over 500,000 within a year.

Lewis was eager to get the AFL, where he was a member of the Executive Council, to launch a similar drive in the mass production industries. But the AFL, with its historic focus on the skilled trade worker, was unwilling to do so. After a bitter internal feud, Lewis and a few others broke with the AFL to set up the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO), later the Congress of Industrial Organizations. The passage of the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) in 1935 and the friendly attitude of the National Labor Relations Board put the power and authority of the federal government behind the CIO.

5. Who led the United Mine Workers (UMW)?

Its first targets were the notoriously anti-union auto and steel industries. In late 1936 a series of sit-down strikes, orchestrated by the fledgling United Auto Workers union under Walter Reuther, erupted at General Motors

plants in Cleveland, Ohio, and Flint, Michigan. Soon 135,000 workers were involved and GM production ground to a halt.

With the sympathetic governor of Michigan refusing to evict the strikers, a settlement was reached in early 1937. By September of that year, the United Auto Workers had contracts with 400 companies involved in the automobile industry, assuring workers a minimum wage of 75 cents per hour and a 40-hour work week.

6. The United Auto Workers (UAW) waged a successful strike against what automobile manufacturer?

In the first six months of its existence, the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC), headed by Lewis lieutenant Philip Murray, picked up 125,000 members. The major American steel company, U.S. Steel, realizing that times had changed, also came to terms in 1937. That same year the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the NLRA. Subsequently, smaller companies, traditionally even more anti-union than the large corporations, gave in. One by one, other industries – rubber, oil, electronics, and textiles – also followed suit.

The rise of big labor had two major long-term impacts. It became the organizational core of the national Democratic Party, and it gained material benefits for its members that all but erased the economic distinction between working-class and middle-class America.

7. What became the organizational core of the national Democratic Party?

