**APUSH: Unit 6 – Organized Labor**

**Article #1**

<http://www.history.com/topics/labor>

The labor movement in the United States grew out of the need to protect the common interest of workers. For those in the industrial sector, organized labor unions fought for better wages, reasonable hours and safer working conditions. The labor movement led efforts to stop child labor, give health benefits and provide aid to workers who were injured or retired.

The origins of the labor movement lay in the formative years of the American nation, when a free wage-labor market emerged in the artisan trades late in the colonial period. The earliest recorded strike occurred in 1768 when New York journeymen tailors protested a wage reduction. The formation of the Federal Society of Journeymen Cordwainers (shoemakers) in Philadelphia in 1794 marks the beginning of sustained trade union organization among American workers. From that time on, local craft unions proliferated in the cities, publishing lists of "prices" for their work, defending their trades against diluted and cheap labor, and, increasingly, demanding a shorter workday. Thus a job-conscious orientation was quick to emerge, and in its wake there followed the key structural elements characterizing American trade unionism--first, beginning with the formation in 1827 of the Mechanics' Union of Trade Associations in Philadelphia, central labor bodies uniting craft unions within a single city, and then, with the creation of the International Typographical Union in 1852, national unions bringing together local unions of the same trade from across the United States and Canada (hence the frequent union designation "international"). Although the factory system was springing up during these years, industrial workers played little part in the early trade union development. In the nineteenth century, trade unionism was mainly a movement of skilled workers.

The early labor movement was, however, inspired by more than the immediate job interest of its craft members. It harbored a conception of the just society, deriving from the Ricardian labor theory of value and from the republican ideals of the American Revolution, which fostered social equality, celebrated honest labor, and relied on an independent, virtuous citizenship. The transforming economic changes of industrial capitalism ran counter to labor's vision. The result, as early labor leaders saw it, was to raise up "two distinct classes, the rich and the poor." Beginning with the workingmen's parties of the 1830s, the advocates of equal rights mounted a series of reform efforts that spanned the nineteenth century. Most notable were the **National Labor Union**, launched in 1866, and the **Knights of Labor**, which reached its zenith in the mid-1880s. On their face, these reform movements might have seemed at odds with trade unionism, aiming as they did at the cooperative commonwealth rather than a higher wage, appealing broadly to all "producers" rather than strictly to wageworkers, and eschewing the trade union reliance on the strike and boycott. But contemporaries saw no contradiction: trade unionism tended to the workers' immediate needs, labor reform to their higher hopes. The two were held to be strands of a single movement, rooted in a common working-class constituency and to some degree sharing a common leadership. But equally important, they were strands that had to be kept operationally separate and functionally distinct.

During the 1880s, that division fatally eroded. Despite its labor reform rhetoric, the Knights of Labor attracted large numbers of workers hoping to improve their immediate conditions. As the Knights carried on strikes and organized along industrial lines, the threatened national trade unions demanded that the group confine itself to its professed labor reform purposes; when it refused, they joined in December 1886 to form the **American Federation of Labor (*AFL*)**. The new federation marked a break with the past, for it denied to labor reform any further role in the struggles of American workers. In part, the assertion of trade union supremacy stemmed from an undeniable reality. As industrialism matured, labor reform lost its meaning--hence the confusion and ultimate failure of the Knights of Labor. Marxism taught **Samuel Gompers** and his fellow socialists that trade unionism was the indispensable instrument for preparing the working class for revolution. The founders of the *AFL* translated this notion into the principle of "pure and simple" unionism: only by self-organization along occupational lines and by a concentration on job-conscious goals would the worker be "furnished with the weapons which shall secure his industrial emancipation."

That class formulation necessarily defined trade unionism as the movement of the entire working class. The *AFL* asserted as a formal policy that it represented all workers, irrespective of skill, race, religion, nationality, or gender. But the national unions that had created the *AFL* in fact comprised only the skilled trades. Almost at once, therefore, the trade union movement encountered a dilemma: how to square ideological aspirations against contrary institutional realities? As sweeping technological change began to undermine the craft system of production, some national unions did move toward an industrial structure, most notably in coal mining and the garment trades. But most craft unions either refused or, as in iron and steel and in meat packing, failed to organize the less skilled. And since skill lines tended to conform to racial, ethnic, and gender divisions, the trade union movement took on a racist and sexist coloration as well. For a short period, the *AFL* resisted that tendency. But in 1895, unable to launch an interracial machinists' union of its own, the Federation reversed an earlier principled decision and chartered the whites-only International Association of Machinists. Formally or informally, the color bar thereafter spread throughout the trade union movement. In 1902, blacks made up scarcely 3 percent of total membership, most of them segregated in Jim Crow locals. In the case of women and eastern European immigrants, a similar devolution occurred--welcomed as equals in theory, excluded or segregated in practice. (Only the fate of Asian workers was unproblematic; their rights had never been asserted by the *AFL* in the first place.)

Gompers justified the subordination of principle to organizational reality on the constitutional grounds of "trade autonomy," by which each national union was assured the right to regulate its own internal affairs. But the organizational dynamism of the labor movement was in fact located in the national unions. Only as they experienced inner change might the labor movement expand beyond the narrow limits--roughly 10 percent of the labor force--at which it stabilized before World War I.

In the political realm, the founding doctrine of pure-and-simple unionism meant an arm's-length relationship to the state and the least possible entanglement in partisan politics. A total separation had, of course, never been seriously contemplated; some objectives, such as immigration restriction, could be achieved only through state action, and the predecessor to the *AFL*, the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions (1881), had in fact been created to serve as labor's lobbying arm in Washington. Partly because of the lure of progressive labor legislation, even more in response to increasingly damaging court attacks on the trade unions, political activity quickened after 1900. With the enunciation of Labor's Bill of Grievances (1906), the *AFL* laid down a challenge to the major parties. Henceforth it would campaign for its friends and seek the defeat of its enemies.

This nonpartisan entry into electoral politics, paradoxically, undercut the left-wing advocates of an independent working-class politics. That question had been repeatedly debated within the *AFL*, first in 1890 over Socialist Labor party representation, then in 1893-1894 over an alliance with the Populist party, and after 1901 over affiliation with the Socialist party of America. Although Gompers prevailed each time, he never found it easy. Now, as labor's leverage with the major parties began to pay off, Gompers had an effective answer to his critics on the left: the labor movement could not afford to waste its political capital on socialist parties or independent politics. When that nonpartisan strategy failed, as it did in the reaction following World War I, an independent political strategy took hold, first through the robust campaigning of the Conference for Progressive Political Action in 1922, and in 1924 through labor's endorsement of Robert La Follette on the Progressive ticket. By then, however, the Republican administration was moderating its hard line, evident especially in Herbert Hoover's efforts to resolve the simmering crises in mining and on the railroads. In response, the trade unions abandoned the Progressive party, retreated to nonpartisanship, and, as their power waned, lapsed into inactivity.

It took the Great Depression to knock the labor movement off dead center. The discontent of industrial workers, combined with New Deal collective bargaining legislation, at last brought the great mass production industries within striking distance. When the craft unions stymied the *AFL*'s organizing efforts, John L. Lewis of the United Mine Workers and his followers broke away in 1935 and formed the Committee for Industrial Organization (*CIO*), which crucially aided the emerging unions in auto, rubber, steel, and other basic industries. In 1938 the *CIO* was formally established as the Congress of Industrial Organizations. By the end of World War II, more than 12 million workers belonged to unions, and collective bargaining had taken hold throughout the industrial economy.

In politics, its enhanced power led the union movement not to a new departure but to a variant on the policy of nonpartisanship. As far back as the Progressive Era, organized labor had been drifting toward the Democratic party, partly because of the latter's greater programmatic appeal, perhaps even more because of its ethnocultural basis of support within an increasingly "new" immigrant working class. With the coming of Roosevelt's New Deal, this incipient alliance solidified, and from 1936 onward the Democratic party could count on--and came to rely on--the campaigning resources of the labor movement. That this alliance partook of the nonpartisan logic of Gompers's authorship--too much was at stake for organized labor to waste its political capital on third parties--became clear in the unsettled period of the early cold war. Not only did the *CIO* oppose the Progressive party of 1948, but it expelled the left-wing unions that broke ranks and supported Henry Wallace for the presidency that year.

The formation of the *AFL*--*CIO* in 1955 visibly testified to the powerful continuities persisting through the age of industrial unionism. Above all, the central purpose remained what it had always been--to advance the economic and job interests of the union membership. Collective bargaining performed impressively after World War II, more than tripling weekly earnings in manufacturing between 1945 and 1970, gaining for union workers an unprecedented measure of security against old age, illness, and unemployment, and, through contractual protections, greatly strengthening their right to fair treatment at the workplace. But if the benefits were greater and if they went to more people, the basic job-conscious thrust remained intact. Organized labor was still a *sectional* movement, covering at most only a third of America's wage earners and inaccessible to those cut off in the low-wage secondary labor market.

Nothing better captures the uneasy amalgam of old and new in the postwar labor movement than the treatment of minorities and women who flocked in, initially from the mass production industries, but after 1960 from the public and service sectors as well. Labor's historic commitment to racial and gender equality was thereby much strengthened, but not to the point of challenging the status quo within the labor movement itself. Thus the leadership structure remained largely closed to minorities--as did the skilled jobs that were historically the preserve of white male workers--notoriously so in the construction trades but in the industrial unions as well. Yet the *AFL*--*CIO* played a crucial role in the battle for civil rights legislation in 1964-1965. That this legislation might be directed against discriminatory trade union practices was anticipated (and quietly welcomed) by the more progressive labor leaders. But more significant was the meaning they found in championing this kind of reform: the chance to act on the broad ideals of the labor movement. And, so motivated, they deployed labor's power with great effect in the achievement of John F. Kennedy's and Lyndon B. Johnson's domestic programs during the 1960s.

This was ultimately economic, not political power, however, and as organized labor's grip on the industrial sector began to weaken, so did its political capability. From the early 1970s onward, new competitive forces swept through the heavily unionized industries, set off by deregulation in communications and transportation, by industrial restructuring, and by an unprecedented onslaught of foreign goods. As oligopolistic and regulated market structures broke down, nonunion competition spurted, concession bargaining became widespread, and plant closings decimated union memberships. The once-celebrated National Labor Relations Act increasingly hamstrung the labor movement; an all-out reform campaign to get the law amended failed in 1978. And with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, there came to power an anti-union administration the likes of which had not been seen since the Harding era. Between 1975 and 1985, union membership fell by 5 million. In manufacturing, the unionized portion of the labor force dropped below 25 percent, while mining and construction, once labor's flagship industries, were decimated. Only in the public sector did the unions hold their own. By the end of the 1980s, less than 17 percent of American workers were organized, half the proportion of the early 1950s.

Swift to change the labor movement has never been. But if the new high-tech and service sectors seemed beyond its reach in 1989, so did the mass production industries in 1929. And, as compared to the old *AFL,* organized labor is today much more diverse and broadly based: 40 percent of its members are white-collar workers, 30 percent are women, and the 14.5 percent who are black signify a greater representation than in the general population and a greater rate of participation than by white workers (22.6 percent compared to 16.3 percent). In the meantime, however, the movement's impotence has been felt. "The collapse of labor's legislative power facilitated the adoption of a set of economic policies highly beneficial to the corporate sector and to the affluent," wrote analyst Thomas B. Edsall in 1984. And, with collective bargaining in retreat, declining living standards of American wage-earning families set in for the first time since the Great Depression. The union movement became in the 1980s a diminished economic and political force, and, in the Age of Reagan, this made for a less socially just nation.

Foster R. Dulles and Melvyn Dubofsky, *Labor in America: A History,* 4th ed. (1984); Robert H. Zieger, *American Workers, American Unions, 1920-1985* (1986).

DavidBrody

**Article #2**

**Learning More About the Labor Unions**

**National Labor Union**

On **August 20**, 1866, the newly organized National Labor Union called on Congress to mandate an eight-hour workday. A coalition of skilled and unskilled workers, farmers, and reformers, the National Labor Union was created to pressure Congress to enact labor reforms. It dissolved in 1873 following a disappointing venture into third-party politics in the 1872 presidential election.

Although the National Labor Union failed to persuade Congress to shorten the workday, its efforts heightened public awareness of labor issues and increased public support for labor reform in the 1870s and 1880s.

**Knights of Labor**

The Knights of Labor was formed in 1869 by **Uriah Stephens** and expanded rapidly under the leadership of **Terrance Powdery**. The Knights were an all-embracing organization committed to a cooperative society. Membership was open to all workers, whether they were skilled or unskilled, black or white, male or female. 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 in conflict. Skilled workers tired of labor activity on the part of unskilled workers who were easily replaced. The Knights, an effective labor force, declined after the [Haymarket Square riots](http://www.chipublib.org/004chicago/timeline/haymarket.html). In the riot members of the Knights of Labor where accused of throwing a bomb which killed police officers. The Knights, already fragmented, where faced with enormous negative publicity, and eventually disbanded.

**Haymarket Square Riot**

Early in 1886 labor unions were beginning a movement for an eight-hour day. Serious trouble was anticipated and on May 1 many workers struck for shorter hours. An active group of radicals and anarchists became involved in the campaign. Two days later shooting and one death occurred during a riot at the McCormick Harvester plant when police tangled with the rioters.

On May 4 events reached a tragic climax at Haymarket Square where a protest meeting was called to denounce the events of the preceding day. At this meeting, while police were undertaking to disperse the crowd, a bomb was exploded. Policeman Mathias J. Degan died almost instantly and seven other officers died later. Eight men were finally brought to trial and Judge Joseph E. Gary imposed the death sentence on seven of them and the eighth was given fifteen years in prison. Four were hanged, one committed suicide and the sentences of two were commuted from death to imprisonment for life. On June 26, 1893, Governor John P. Altgeld pardoned the three who were in the penitentiary.

**American Federation of Labor**

The **American Federation of Labor** was founded by **Samuel Gompers** in 1886. Gompers, born in 1850, came as a boy with his parents to America from the Jewish slums of London; he entered the cigar-making trade and received much of his education as a "reader" (a worker who read books, newspaper stories, poetry and magazine articles to fellow employees to help break the monotony of their work in the shop) and became a leader of his local union and of the national Cigar Makers Union.

A statement by the founders of the AFL expressed their belief in the need for more effective union organization. "The various trades have been affected by the introduction of machinery, the subdivision of labor, the use of women's and children's labor and the lack of an apprentice system-so that the skilled trades were rapidly sinking to the level of pauper labor," the AFL declared. "To protect the skilled labor of America from being reduced to beggary and to sustain the standard of American workmanship and skill, the trades unions of America have been established." Thus the AFL was a **federation** that organized only unions of skilled workers.

**Pullman Strike**

The [Pullman Strike](http://www.k12.tn.us/explorers/heltonj/project/pullman.html) in 1894, at the Pullman plant near Chicago, the American Railroad Union (not affiliated with the AFL and led by **Eugene V. Debs**, a leading American socialist) struck the company's manufacturing plant and called for a boycott of the handling of Pullman's sleeping and parlor cars on the nation's railroads. Within a week, 125,000 railroad workers were engaged in a sympathy protest strike. The government swore in 3,400 special deputies; later, at the request of the railroad association, President Cleveland moved in federal troops to break the strike-despite a plea by Gov. Altgeld of Illinois that their presence was unnecessary. Finally a sweeping federal court injunction forced an end to the sympathy strike, and many railroad workers were blacklisted. The Pullman strikers were essentially starved into submissive defeat.

The strike illustrated the increasing tendency of the government to offer moral support and military force to break strikes. The injunction, issued usually and almost automatically by compliant judges on the request of government officials or corporations, became a prime legal weapon against union organizing and action.

**Industrial Workers of the World (IWW)**

Another of the historic industrial conflicts prior to World War I occurred in 1912 in the textile mills of Lawrence, Mass. It was led not by an AFL union but by the radical Industrial Workers of the World-the[IWW, or the Wobblies](http://www.iww.org/), as they were generally known -an organization in frequent verbal and physical conflict with the AFL and its affiliates. The strike in Lawrence started when the mill owners, responding to a state legislature action reducing the work week from 54 to 52, coldly and without prior notice cut the pay rates by a 31/2 percent. The move produced predictable results: a strike of 50,000 textile workers; arrests; fiery statements by the IWW leaders; police and militia attacks on peaceful meetings; and broad public support for the strikers. Some 400 children of strikers were "adopted" by sympathizers. When women strikers and their children were attacked at the railroad station by the police after authorities had decided no more youngsters could leave town, an enraged public protest finally forced the mill owners not only to restore the pay cuts but to increase the workers' wages to more realistic levels.

<http://theroanokestar.com/2013/09/03/the-tangled-roots-of-labor-day/>