

# MASSACHUSETTS / AFL-CIO

MASSACHUSETTS



## **ANNUAL SCHOLARSHIP AWARDS PROGRAM**

# **LABOR HISTORY STUDY INFORMATION**



# MASSACHUSETTS AFL-CIO

*Today's Unions*

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Dear Student:

This study guide has been prepared to assist you with the Massachusetts AFL-CIO Scholarship Test. The union movement in the Commonwealth and the country has a proud and exciting history of improving the quality of life for all working men and women.

Unions were also one of the founding forces for public education and the AFL-CIO Scholarship Program is just one of many ways organized labor assists young people.

The test itself will consist of one essay question and a 40 question "multiple choice" section whose answers will be clear through careful reading of the study guide. To learn more about the timeline of labor history, please visit <http://www.aflcio.org/aboutaflcio/history/history/timeline.cfm>.

On behalf of the Massachusetts AFL-CIO, we would like to wish you good luck on the test and best wishes for your academic future. When you enter the workforce of tomorrow, always remember Massachusetts works best when we say "Union Yes".

Sincerely,

Robert J. Haynes  
President

## ***Introduction:***

American history textbooks tell us that Robert Fulton built the steamboat, that the Wright brothers built the first airplane, and that Henry Ford built the first mass-produced motor car. These books also record the names of the contractors who built the transcontinental railroad and the Empire State Building and the manufacturers who built the tanks, the bombers and the aircraft carriers that helped US forces win World War II.

### ***What have the struggles of working people contributed to American history?***

But the textbooks do not usually tell you about the working people who built America. It is only in recent years that students of history have been able to learn what workers accomplished. They crafted and sailed the ships that made colonial merchants wealthy. They assembled the guns and forged the cannon that won independence. They picked the cotton and ran the weaving machines that started an industrial revolution. They laid the track and ran the railroads that linked the nation.

Laboring men and women staffed the hospitals that nursed us, built the housing that sheltered us, produced the fuel that warmed us, packed and served the food that nourished us, assembled and drove the vehicles that moved us, and much, much more. And when the nation went to war, workers made most of the sacrifices to produce the materials of war; they also did most of the fighting and most of the dying on countless battlefields, near and far.

Working people in Massachusetts made the same contributions to our economy and the same sacrifices to defend our democracy. The workers of this Commonwealth took a leading role in a great transformation that affected the course of United States History: the Industrial Revolution that began in Massachusetts and made the United States the workshop of the world.

Working people did more than build America's industries and railroads, its highways and bridges, its armies and navies. Laboring men and women also built our democracy from the ground up.

Our textbooks are rightly concerned with the great contributions of nation builders like George Washington, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson as well as with those leaders who followed them and built a stronger nation through wars and depressions. These include presidents like Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Yet, our texts do not usually tell us how working people made our society more democratic. They did this when they acted as citizens, applying the Bill of Rights to the world of work, and extending civil liberties to protect the freedoms of all citizens. Laboring folk also organized themselves to make government work for the majority. Together they demanded better public education, public housing and public health, and insisted on reforms that limited the power of money in politics and expanded democracy to include the disenfranchised.

Workers built this country's industries and political institutions by exerting their collective power. They did this by creating unions to protect their own interests—to end their own exploitation and oppression. Organizing for self-protection enhanced workers' self-respect and it produced enduring traditions of mutual aid. Despite internal struggles in the house of labor, union activists believed that an injury to one was the concern of all, and that working people needed to unite or else be divided and conquered by their employers. At their best, unionized workers extended their belief in brotherhood and sisterhood beyond their own workplaces and communities to encompass all those who toiled as employees.

In sum, working people also built this nation. They fought in the American Revolution that led to the creation of a Constitution and Bill of Rights that promised freedom to all citizens. They sacrificed their lives in the Civil War to end slavery. And they fought for the expansion of voting rights, first to poor working men, then to black men who had been slaves, and later to women.

## *What have working people's struggles contributed to American freedom?*

One of our most cherished freedoms is the right to free expression. The First Amendment to the Constitution prohibits the government from denying free speech; but it did not prevent employers from denying free speech to their employees. As a result, in many workplaces today employers are free to call a compulsory meeting and speak against workers who are trying to organize; but those workers are not free to call their own meeting and exercise their right to free speech, unless they are protected by a union contract which protect their rights.

Over the last 175 years, the same restrictions have applied to workers' freedom of association and freedom of assembly. Although these freedoms are guaranteed by the Bill of Rights, they did not apply to workers who labored on their employers' private property. Indeed for many years judges ruled that workers who formed associations to improve their conditions had actually engaged in illegal conspiracies to damage their employers' property. According to the courts, employers' property included their "ownership" of employees' labor, paid for with wages.

For more than century, U.S. courts ruled that the property rights of employers had to be protected at the expense of the civil rights of working Americans. In short, individual workers had no civil rights in the workplace.

Gradually, in struggle after struggle, working men and women organized, marched, and protested for freedom; they pushed for the legislation of new labor laws and the judicial reversal of old laws that denied civil rights to workers. Their actions persuaded the courts that the worker's right to strike and to engage in peaceful picketing should be protected under the Constitution and that workers protected by a union contract should enjoy the right to free speech while at work. As a result, union members expanded the boundaries of freedom in the United States.

Labor unions are primarily responsible for the unusual freedom American workers enjoy today. Workers created labor unions because they learned from hard experience that they were powerless when, as individual employees, they tried to negotiate with employers over the terms of their employment. The workers had no legal standing in court even when they were injured in a dangerous workplace. The law said employees were responsible for their own health and safety on the job although they lacked control over their working conditions

Today, 15.8 million American workers enjoy the rights and freedoms their unions have won for them. These liberties are codified at law and in collective bargaining agreements that workers have made with employers. In Massachusetts, more than 400,000 men and women, native-born and immigrant, and people of all races and ethnicities have a voice at work through their unions.

Every other worker in the United States is an employee-at-will, that is, an individual working without a contract that guarantees the duration and terms of employment. If you are an employee-at-will, an employer can fire you at any time, for any reason, and you have no recourse unless you can make a legal case that you have been discriminated against based on age, gender, race, sexuality, or disability. Without evidence of discrimination and without the money to take your case to court, you have no legal recourse.

If you are a union member, you are protected by a collective agreement that provides you with several benefits. Employers are required to show "just cause" for dismissals, and employees may file a grievance and enjoy free representation from the union if discriminated against. Unions are allowed by law to hold meetings at the work site during non-work hours. Unorganized employees cannot. Unions are allowed by law to publicize their case against unfair treatment by employers in the newspapers and on the radio and television. Individual

non-union employees cannot. In some progressive workplaces, unions create committees of workers to meet with management to discuss and solve workplace problems and to train union apprentices.

In our public schools, teachers were, until a few decades ago, restricted in what they could teach and how they could teach by local school boards and by principals. If a teacher taught a controversial book, asked a provocative question, or made a critical statement, she could be disciplined or fired. When teacher unions won collective bargaining rights, educators also gained the freedom to teach in open classrooms where they and their students could consider all points of view. This kind of critical learning (that is, rigorous analysis) is essential to educating young people to become active, concerned citizens when they reach voting age.

In sum, through their unions, U.S. workers have a voice on the job.

Using the collective rights they have won over two centuries of struggle, American workers have created a standard of living that is the envy of many people around the world. Union wage gains through bargaining have forced non-union employers to increase their wages. And for those who still work on the edge of poverty, the union movement has fought repeatedly to raise the legal minimum wage and to create a new standard of living for these workers called “the living wage.”

Today’s union members enjoy a number of advantages that are unavailable to non-unionized workers. These include higher hourly wages and salaries, especially among women, immigrants, and workers of color. Union members are more likely to have better health plans and pensions and safer working conditions. They also have greater job stability in an increasingly volatile global economy. These are just a few of the tangible advantages to union membership.<sup>1</sup>

### ***What does the union movement stand for?***

Throughout its entire history, the trade union movement has held and advocated for important social and ethical values. These have inspired labor’s arguments for a living wage, for a voice at work, for the freedom from danger on the jobs, as well as arguments for the right to health care and retirement benefits.

In fighting to defend themselves in an economy where only the fittest survived, union members and their leaders often challenged the rules of the marketplace and the values of the profit system. And so, throughout our history, organized workers have engaged employers in moral as well as economic struggle. While union workers have shared many values and beliefs with other Americans, including employers, they have also defended certain cherished human values against the laws of the marketplace and the logic of “the bottom line.” In a relentlessly competitive society, unions enabled workers to define “a fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay” and empowered workers to make more of their own time—to free themselves from the tyranny of working sun up to sun down, six days a week. Union members were the folks who brought America the weekend.

Instead of the kind of competition that caused “a race to the bottom”—competition in the market place that leads employers to drastically cut production costs, including wages, union members proposed cooperation. Instead of seeing the workplace as a jungle in which only the fittest survived, they dreamed of a community at work in which workers came to the aid of one another. Instead of seeing wage labor as simply another saleable “commodity” like other raw materials, they insisted on the humanity of the employee. Instead of seeing themselves as slaves to the clock—as people who lived only to work, they asserted their own dignity. As the immigrant women sang during a mass strike of textile workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts: “We want bread, but we want roses, too.”

In a society dedicated to individual achievement, unions sought social improvement. Individual union members wanted to improve their lives, but not at the expense of fellow workers. In a society dominated by those

who punished the victims of poverty, unions called for a more generous spirit. “We want more schoolhouses and less jails,” said Samuel Gompers, first President of the American Federation of Labor, “more justice and less revenge.”

## ***Part One: The History of Massachusetts Workers: The Struggle for Free Labor, 1630-1860***

*During the Colonial Era, most working men and women enjoyed no legal rights and few protections. African slaves, whose numbers reached four million by 1860, were denied even the most basic human rights.*

*But “free laborers” of European origin were not wholly free. Indentured servants and youthful apprentices sacrificed their freedom of movement to their masters, as housewives did to their husbands.*

*Mechanics and laborers were “free to quit” only if they found an employer oppressive, but they had no other rights protected by law. If they combined with one another to demand better pay or shorter hours, these early labor unions were broken up by judges who declared workers’ organizations “illegal conspiracies.”*

*Although they lacked the right to strike and to organize together, these workers did have some power. Some craftsmen also made rules of work that limited the employers’ control over them and allowed them to express their humanity on the job. Colonial laborers also shared customs that emphasized mutual support and cooperation. These traditions were expressed in the mutual aid and benevolent societies colonial workers formed to help each other.*

*When the American colonists rebelled against Great Britain, their Declaration of Independence promised all citizens “certain inalienable rights’ including life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. But colonists defined the citizenry narrowly, excluding anyone who was not white, native-born, and male. As a result, when the U.S. Constitution was adopted, it guaranteed rights mainly to white men who owned property, including those who owned slaves.*

*It was the struggle to abolish slavery and bring “free labor” to the South that provoked working men and women in the North to demand new rights—not only as citizens, but also as working people. They wanted “equal rights”, the same rights men of property enjoyed. They wanted their government to honor the First Amendment and to protect the right to a free press, to free assembly and to freedom of association.*

*Ultimately, they fought a war that led to the end of slavery and to a constitutional amendment that banned forever “involuntary servitude.” The emancipation of slaves made the desire for liberty contagious among all working people who endured—involuntarily—many kinds of oppression in the workplace.*

*In their struggle to be wholly free as American citizens and workers, laboring people created the union movement to win the vital rights and protections we take for granted today. It was a difficult and costly struggle in which hard fought gains were often reversed. And it is an ongoing struggle, one that will determine whether American workers will be free from fear and abuse in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.*

### *The Origins of the U.S. Trade Union Movement and its Struggle for Civil Rights*

Let’s begin by asking the question: where do human and civil rights come from? How are they achieved and expanded?

The story that answers these questions begins in 1607, the year that Captain John Smith founded the Jamestown colony. Smith pled with his London sponsors to send more artisans and laborers for the tobacco plantations that required many hands. The English planters failed to enslave the native Indians they had conquered, so they relied upon indentured servants. These individuals—purchased from the ranks of the poorest outcasts in

Europe, exchanged their labor for transportation to the colonies and eventual freedom. But these servants did not immigrate in sufficient numbers to meet the colonial demand for labor. Others violated the terms of their bondage and escaped to freedom.

With labor scarce, planters then began to buy Africans from slave traders. At first, the European and African servants suffered under the same terms of forced labor; they toiled together and even combined in an armed rebellion that frightened Virginia planters in 1660. To divide and conquer the laboring class, the colony's rulers extended African terms of servitude to life and shortened white terms. Within a few decades, slavery was legally restricted to Africans and defined strictly by color, while rebellious poor whites gained freedom from servitude as well as access to land and to participation in public life.

In the Northern colonies, indentured servants and African slaves toiled in the seaports, but most of the English settlers worked their own land. Household production depended upon women and children, while the masters of small workshops employed boys as apprentices, along with "journeymen"—the skilled artisans who had completed their apprenticeships. As early as 1646, ten years after the settlement of the Massachusetts Bay colony, shoemakers requested the "liberty" of forming a company or guild. These organizations originated in the middle ages and set fair prices for their members' products, regulated working conditions, and limited access to employment in the trade. A few years later, members of the Boston ship carpenters guild removed a newcomer who had not served his time as an apprentice in the trade. In 1734, the city's bakers engaged in the first recorded strike to protect fair prices for their bread.

During the 1700's, the spirit of "liberty" grew among artisans and laborers in the English colonies. The young Benjamin Franklin, who grew up in Boston, hated the drudgery of his apprenticeship in a stinking candle shop. He fled to Philadelphia and became a famous printer, writer, and inventor. Franklin's "aversion to arbitrary power" as a boy helped make him a leader of the American Revolution and a Founding Father of the new nation.

The same spirit inflamed colonials in the Massachusetts Bay Colony who resisted in 1747 when the British Royal Navy tried to forcibly "impress" or steal them into service. It fired up the sailors who resisted tyrannical captains at sea and even mutinied against cruel officers. English seamen were known to "strike" the sails of their ships to protest their misery—thus giving a name to the act of refusing to work in the name of justice. The spirit of liberty also ignited Boston crowds who rioted in 1765 against oppressive laws and taxes imposed by the English Parliament. It inspired the Sons and Daughters of Liberty who rallied on the Boston Common green and sang "with hearts united" their motto: "We Dare Be Free."

The cry for liberty sparked the protests of shipyard apprentices against the British military occupation of Boston in 1770; the same ones who shed blood when red-coated troops shot and killed two apprentice boys and a runaway slave named Crispus Attucks. These workers were the first heroes of the struggle for independence from England, the first martyrs for freedom. They lie together in Boston's Old Granary burial ground.

Master artisans and farmers, apprentices and journeymen, and servants and housewives all fought in the American Revolution against British despotism. However, the planters, merchants and lawyers who led the Patriot cause and ruled the new nation opposed calls for democracy from the laboring classes or attempts to abolish slavery.

Master artisans and mechanics were the staunchest defenders of the new Republic, the United States of America. And although the nation's new Constitution protected property rights above all else, at least the Bill of Rights promised freedom of speech, press, and assembly. Yet, the promise of equality under the law remained unfulfilled. When artisans and journeymen asserted their rights as citizens by creating association to protect their wages and working conditions, their masters prosecuted them for engaging in "criminal conspiracies" against private property. In 1805, Philadelphia shoemakers were the first of many associations to be indicted on charges of

forming “a combination [i.e., employee association] and conspiracy to raise wages.” The U.S. judiciary had ruled on the side of the employer.

During the early 1800’s, such conflicts fractured the sense of trust and the bond of mutual interest that once existed between the masters who owned the shops and the journeymen who labored for them. Agreements between parties, once sealed by a handshake, now required a written contract. Friendly societies had bonded masters and journeymen and fostered mutual aid, but when these labor bodies attempted to enforce wage scales, the employees found it necessary to expel resistant employers.

Over time, entrepreneurial masters and merchant capitalists demanded more regular work habits without the customary long lunch time, coffee break, and respite for rum and beer. A new industrial morality emphasized the virtues of relentless work, obedience to authority, and total abstinence from strong drink. As shops grew larger and business competition intensified in the early nineteenth century, the work process changed rapidly. The increasing use of machinery and the sub-division of work began the process of the de-skilling of artisan work that would continue throughout the century. The familial workplaces of an earlier era were now being replaced by larger and impersonal manufactories. Because of these new methods of production, journeymen artisans, also called “mechanics,” had considerably less control over the labor process and working conditions.

Artisans in New England and the Mid-Atlantic States rebelled against these changes in increasing numbers. Mechanics believed in a “fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay”. But they objected to the “bosses” or “grinders” who saw their employees simply as “hands” and treated them “like slaves.”

In 1832, journeymen ship carpenters in Massachusetts protested against working sun up to sun down; they struck for a ten-hour day and for their personal freedom. Because the law said that they were born free with rights equal to those of their bosses, the carpenters refused to beg for favors and instead demanded shorter hours “as a right.” They were accused of forming a “horrible combination” against their employers. But the strikers were defeated by another kind of combination, one between their masters and the merchants who invested in the shipyards. The carpenters’ spokesman denounced the masters as hypocrites who praised workingmen when they combined in volunteer fire companies to protect their homes and shops, but cried foul when their employees combined to improve their lot.

In his famous “Address to the Workingmen of New England” (1832), Rhode Island carpenter Seth Luther reminded his readers that the Declaration of Independence “was the work of a combination” and equally despised by wealthy Tories who remained loyal to the King of England. Why then, he asked, did master craftsmen and their investors oppose the right of journeymen carpenters to form a combination? For the next century, the labor movement employed the language of American Revolutionaries in its struggle to save their Republic from corruption and subversion by the rich and powerful. Like the anti-slavery crusaders and women’s rights advocates who gathered at Seneca Falls in 1844, the founders of the labor movement constantly evoked the Declaration of Independence with its emphasis on equal rights.

The first trade unions formed among craftsmen in the 1830’s quickly consolidated themselves into city-wide trades union assemblies capable of affecting electoral campaigns and launching legislative actions on behalf of “equal rights.” In Philadelphia, Irish immigrants on the wharves quit work and launched a citywide general strike for the ten-hour day in 1835. Its success propelled a wave of effective strikes for shorter hours and higher wages. In these “turnouts” unions appealed directly for public support, denouncing the employers as greedy men and would-be aristocrats who had no place in a Republic based on “the equality of her citizens.”

Workingmen’s associations and trade unions continued to face criminal prosecution as “conspiracies in restraint of trade,” but the desire to organize could not be suppressed. After years of struggle, the legality of trade unionism was first established in 1842 by the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts. The court ruled that

workers could legally associate with each other and seek to persuade others to do so without “being criminal”—as long as unions employed fair and honorable means to this end. The court’s ruling in *Commonwealth vs. Hunt* still allowed employers to seek injunctions against unions. Nevertheless, workers’ collective action had finally forced the judiciary to recognize their right to organize.

When the labor movement recuperated after the depression of 1837, new leadership emerged from unexpected places, especially in the textile mills of Lowell, Massachusetts. Here capitalists built a “model” factory town and recruited young, single women from rural New England as laborers. Mill owners set out to create an industrial paradise, but in the face of mounting competition for low-priced woven goods, industrialists abandoned this goal. As profits sank, mill agents intensified and accelerated the pace of work. Female textile operatives now worked many machines where formerly they had worked fewer. The pace of work increased dramatically and made the thirteen- and fourteen-hour day unbearable for textile employees.

Angry “factory girls” struck over deteriorating conditions during the 1830s and helped revive the ten-hour movement in the 1840’s. Led by Sarah Bagley, they formed a Female Labor Reform Association which brought working women into public life like “the heroines” of the American Revolution. Calling themselves the “daughters of free-born men,” they joined Massachusetts ship carpenters in demanding a ten-hour work day, so they could enjoy more “free time” to devote to family, community and civic life.

Equally troubling was the large number of children in the early industrial workforce. While most were teenagers, many were as young as eight and nine years old. Their numbers had increased so markedly by 1832 that the New England Association of Farmers, Mechanics [or journeymen artisans], and Other Working Men appointed a committee to investigate this matter.

Massachusetts workers sought to free their children from wage labor by making it obligatory to receive an education. Early trade unionists agreed that the responsibilities of citizenship in a democratic society made it imperative that all Americans be well taught. According to Horace Mann, who championed education for all citizens in Massachusetts: “It was the tradesmen who first came to the legislature to plead the cause of public education because they realized that their sons and daughters would forever remain slaves to an industrial machine unless given equal opportunity for education with sons and daughters of the wealthy.” The press, government, and business opposed the establishment of public schools, describing them as “socialistic” and “destructive of individual initiative.” Labor’s victory was a notable contribution to the welfare of the Commonwealth’s working-class children and their families.

During the 1850’s the shorter hours movement made the ten-hour day the standard for most tradesmen and laborers outside the mills. This freedom movement unified men and women, the skilled and unskilled, who, despite their different earnings, shared the same desire to escape the tyranny of a workday that lasted into the night.

In 1857, another depression undermined trade unions and worsened tensions among workers based on race, religion, and national origin. In the 1840s, Ireland’s famine forced many of its people to emigrate to the United States. Once here, they encountered hostility from native-born and mainly protestant Americans who feared the Irish as competitors for scant jobs and as “papist” Catholics. Outbreaks of violence against the Irish working-class took place in Lawrence, Massachusetts and elsewhere in the Commonwealth in the years before the Civil War.

Determined to survive yet another economic crisis, unions sought to organize across ethnic lines and took militant action against wage cuts. The Grand Association of Pennsylvania called a general strike in 1859 to restore pay cuts and succeeded, despite attempts to divide workers by nationality.

The racial divide among working-class men and women was harder to conquer. In Massachusetts, the birthplace of the abolitionist movement, some labor leaders allied with opponents of slavery. As they saw it, a democratic Republic was nourished by “free labor” and diminished by slave labor. Even so, free black laborers confronted insurmountable barriers to obtaining work in the Bay State. Frederick Douglass, a Maryland slave, was one of many who escaped to the Commonwealth seeking freedom and employment. Settling in New Bedford, he sought work on the city’s docks. Douglass soon learned that he would be unable to practice his trade. Despite widespread support for abolitionism in Massachusetts, free black laborers suffered from the racial discrimination practiced by white employers and workers alike.

As the anti-slavery movement took hold in Massachusetts, working men and women argued that their own freedom had been sacrificed to employer greed. One result was that a new aggressiveness appeared in the Massachusetts labor movement in the late 1840s and 1850s. It was reflected in the spread of strikes and culminated in one of the greatest workers’ protests in the history of the nation. The massive shoe strike began on the morning of February 22, 1860 when local shoemakers marched through the streets of Lynn to employers’ shops and handed in their working tools.

The shoemakers (or cordwainers, as they were then called) who made Lynn the nation’s shoe city enjoyed a long history of democratic thought and independent behavior. They began meeting in 1858, and by winter of 1860 demanded that shoe manufacturers adopt a standardized wage schedule. When the employers refused, the workers began the largest strike witnessed by that generation of Americans. Before it was over, twenty thousand shoemakers deserted their workplaces and another twenty thousand people participated in various meetings and parades organized by the strikers. They chose to begin the walkout on Washington’s Birthday to identify themselves as bearers of an equal-rights tradition rooted in the first American Revolution.

In subsequent weeks, women conducted their own strike meetings and made their presence felt in the streets. At a March 7, 1860, procession organized in their honor, eight hundred women strikers marched for several hours in falling snow through downtown Lynn, carrying banners that proclaimed their own attachment to the equal rights heritage:

AMERICAN LADIES WILL NOT BE SLAVES: GIVE US A FAIR  
COMPENSATION AND WE WILL LABOUR CHEERFULLY

By this time, the great Massachusetts shoe workers strike had attracted national attention. Campaigning for the Republican presidential nomination in New England, Abraham Lincoln declared the walkout a demonstration of the very freedom slavery denied. “I am glad to see that a system of labor prevails in New England under which laborers can strike when they want to, where they are not obliged to labor whether you pay them or not. I like a system which lets a man quit when he wants to, and wish it might prevail everywhere.”

Lincoln was elected President in 1860 with the support of the anti-slavery and labor movements in the North, and his victory hastened the secession of the Southern states and the outbreak of the Civil War between slave and free states. The war to preserve the Union eventually became a war to emancipate slaves and create a free labor system in the slave South.

## ***Part Two: The Struggle for Free Trade Unions, 1860-1916***

*During this period four million African Americans won their freedom and black men won the right to full citizenship, even though the enemies of equality would take it away from them. After the Civil War, black “freedmen” and “freed women” and white working people began to question the meaning of their freedom to work. How free were they if planters could force black men and women to pick cotton for starvation wages? How free were they if factory and mine owners could force male and female factory workers and their children to labor twelve to fourteen hours a day? How meaningful was the right to work under these conditions?*

*Working people’s quest for dignity and respect in the workplace led them to form state-wide and national labor bodies, mobilize allies, organize strikes and boycotts, and lobby their elected representatives to win new liberties. Of greatest importance to them were the rights to a fair day’s pay, an eight-hour day, safer working conditions, and the liberty to strike and organize and protest peacefully.*

*After 1870, U.S. employers organized themselves as mammoth, inter-state corporations to monopolize national markets. Their size and assets gave them a decided advantage in conflicts with smaller-scale trade unions. To make matters worse, state and federal governments wielded their police powers against working people, aiding business leaders seeking to crush labor militancy. It is astonishing to learn how many unionized workers sacrificed their lives to win basic civil rights—and how much they had left to fight for on the eve of World War I.*

### *The Struggle for Workplace Democracy Intensifies*

Northern mechanics rallied to the Union cause during the Civil War, contributing a large number of volunteer soldiers. Free black volunteers who insisted on joining the Union Army were also workingmen, many just free of slavery.

William H. Sylvis, head of the Iron Molders, recruited a regiment from his own union’s ranks that moved to defend Washington against Confederate forces. At the same time, he built an organization capable of winning a union shop in most of the nation’s foundries and he launched labor’s newest crusade: the fight for the eight-hour workday.

Hundreds of eight-hour leagues formed during and after the Civil War from coast to coast, pressuring eight state legislatures to enact eight-hour laws and helping persuade the U.S. Congress to create such a law for federal employees in 1868. When the government failed to enforce these laws, the labor movement drew a lesson: legislative gains could only be preserved by militant well-organized unions ready to enter politics as an independent force. For the rest of the nineteenth century, unions participated in numerous reform parties created as alternatives to the two established parties they believed to be corrupted by the power of money.

The eight-hour movement of the Civil War years also stimulated the formation of the National Labor Union (N. L. U.), founded in 1867 as a federation of unions with William Sylvis as its first President. The need to organize workers on a national level became apparent during the years when an expanding network of railways knit together statewide and regional commercial markets. This development, in combination with the application of new technologies, fostered the growth of large-scale industrial enterprises capable of out-gunning local and statewide unions. By 1869, there were twenty-four national unions in the United States.

Under Sylvis, the N. L. U. favored the organization of women who were entering many trades and were forming unions in some of them. For example, in the shoe industry, the Daughters of St. Crispin represented the women stitchers while the Knights of St. Crispin represented male workers.

Sylvis and the N. L. U. also supported the unionization of black workers who had started organizing their own unions. These workers were represented at the 1869 convention of the National Labor Union by nine delegates, including a ship caulker named Issac Myers who urged black workers to organize themselves. However, he was disappointed by the N. L. U.'s failure to welcome black workers into white unions.

Sylvis died in 1869 before the unraveling of his efforts to unite union workers across lines of race and gender. Soon, the N. L. U. itself died amidst the depression that hit in 1873 and held the nation in its grip for six long years.

After 1870, an increasing number of Americans earned their daily bread in urban industrial centers rather than in agriculture. This was especially true of Massachusetts, where wage earners were hostages to a boom and bust economy. In bad times, and in the absence of a social safety net (not created until the 1930s New Deal), Bay State workers endured grinding poverty.

In the late 1870's, relations between employers and employees became extremely violent. The Knights and Daughters of St. Crispin preached cooperation with manufacturers and contributed to the prosperity of many shoe towns, but this influential organization was attacked by shoe bosses and destroyed.

In 1875 the powerful textile mill workers of Fall River, Massachusetts, led by militant English trade unionists, struck against a wage cut. But after a so-called "great vacation" of eight weeks, they were forced by their children's' hunger and the state militia to accept wage cuts and sign "yellow dog contracts," agreements that barred workers from ever joining a union again.

By signing these agreements, workers pledged never to join a union again. (These contracts remained legal until 1931, when Congress passed the Norris-La Guardia Act outlawing them.)

In Pennsylvania's coal fields, the long strike of 1875 turned bloody when employers branded union leaders "advocates of the Commune" (or communists) and then imported scab (or non-union) labor and hired armed company police to protect them. When the Irish miners fought back, the death count mounted, and the press blamed a secret order it called the Molly Maguires for the civil war in the anthracite coal mining region. On the testimony of an infamous informer employed by the Pinkerton Detective Agency<sup>2</sup>, twenty Irish miners were convicted and executed by hanging in 1876. It was the first chapter in a century-long struggle for union recognition that would cost the lives of many more union workers.

The next chapter was even bloodier. When workers on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad protested a wage cut in 1877—a time of increased corporate profits—strikers seized locomotives, stopped trains, surrounded round houses, and paralyzed the nation's strongest corporations. General strikes erupted in Chicago where police killed twelve strikers and in St. Louis where unions took over the city for a few days until armed vigilantes, mounted police, federal infantry, and militia regained control and jailed the strike leadership. In Pittsburgh, state militia-men shot twenty working-class protestors to death and provoked a ferocious assault on railroad property.

To a young cigar maker in New York's Lower East Side, the great uprising of 1877 sounded the trumpet, not of defeat, but of warning. It alerted the labor leaders to steel themselves for battle with powerful forces far more hostile than an earlier generation of trade unionists could have imagined. This young stogie maker, a Jewish immigrant from London named Samuel Gompers, was one of many newcomers who learned that for workers, America was not yet the land of the free.

When the depression ended, Gompers joined other trade unionists in a painstaking effort to build new unions that could survive in a hostile environment. But these trades unions needed to create a new national federation to ensure their survival; and so, in 1881 their leaders met in Pittsburgh to do just that, forming the Federation of Organized Trades. One of those leaders was Samuel Gompers whose cigarmakers union persuaded New York lawmakers to ban sweatshops.

With the end of a long, hard depression in 1879, unions spread with impressive speed. By 1882, according to a contemporary report, “In all principal cities, the trade unions are allied for mutual assistance with Central Councils or Trade Assemblies.”

Activists in New York City’s Central Labor Union staged the first Labor Day parade on September 5, 1882, to show the strength and unity of the labor movement and to warn politicians not to pander to greedy “monopolists.” A quarter million New Yorkers watched thousands of trade unionists march on that first Labor Day. After unions in several states made Labor Day an official holiday, the U.S. Congress declared it a national day for workers in 1894. Public support for organized labor had grown and the popularity of Labor Day symbolized that support.

Trade unionists not only belonged to the Federation of Trades, many were also members of a national organization formed in 1869, the Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor (K. of L.). Knights’ leaders opposed direct confrontation with employers and sought arbitration as a way of avoiding strike violence. Originally, the Knights was a secret society. This was typical for a labor organization in those days. Because the judiciary had legitimated the existence of trade unions, employers used devious tactics to undermine labor organizations. These included the use of spies and blacklists—employer-kept lists of workers sympathetic to unionism and used to bar their employment. Secrecy was, in short, protection for unions and their members from employer retaliation.

The Knights of Labor dreamed of “one great solidarity” and created an inclusive movement of all producers, including the skilled and unskilled, native and foreign born, male and female. They even welcomed housewives in their mixed assemblies. The Knights appealed strongly to Southern black workers who formed hundreds of “colored assemblies” of their own. The K. of L. made significant strides toward bi-racial labor solidarity, but the Order opposed the use of contract laborers from foreign lands and joined the trade unions in pushing for laws excluding Asian immigrants from the U.S.

The Order expanded in the 1880s when it attracted many angry wage earners itching to fight back against oppressive employers, like railroad baron Jay Gould who boasted: “I can hire one half of the working class to kill the other half.” Rank-and-file Knights launched a militant strike against Gould’s Southern Pacific Railroad in 1885. Their stunning victory, with the support of farmers and townspeople, electrified other workers. Strikes erupted all over during the early 1880s—an average of about 500 per year, until “The Great Upheaval” of 1886 when 1,432 work stoppages rocked the nation’s workplaces.

During this insurgency, thousands of workers caught the eight-hour fever. The Knights leader Terence Powderly advised legislative action to shorten the work day, but when the Federation of Trades called for a general strike to force employers to accept eight hours work, its appeal was answered by thousands of rank and file Knights of Labor. On May 1, 1886, over 200,000 workers, led by the skilled tradesmen, took to the streets shouting their demand: “Eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, eight hours for what we will!” This exciting movement appealed widely to all kinds of workers.

The great general strike for eight hours impressed observers here and abroad, but it ended soon after a bomb exploded in police ranks during a labor rally in Chicago’s Haymarket Square on May 4. The explosion killed one officer and fatally wounded five others. Many in the crowd fell dead when police opened fire on those

who remained in the Square. The revolutionary socialists who led the central labor union in the city were arrested and tried for murder as a “red scare” swept the nation.

The violent events in Chicago deflated the mass strikes and killed the grand eight-hour movement. The Knights of Labor had been opposed to the strike and abhorred violence, but they were unfairly blamed for the Haymarket tragedy; and when employers seized the opportunity to attack the K. of L., the Noble Order declined rapidly.

Many trade unionists within the K. of L. had criticized the Order for stressing political reform and for including unskilled workers and middle-class allies in their assemblies. They wanted a new federation of trades union based on occupational solidarity and controlled solely by the members of the trades. On December 8, 1886 trades union delegates met in Columbus, Ohio, to form a new national organization based on these principles: the American Federation of Labor (A.F.L.).

The A.F.L.’s first president, Samuel Gompers of the Cigarmakers, and its first secretary and Carpenters’ leader, Peter J. McGuire, became labor leaders in rough-and-tumble New York City. There they learned how to fight with politicians and with employers who tried to undermine the trades by replacing craftsmen with machines or unskilled “greenhorns,” (or inexperienced workers).

The A.F.L. founders invited unskilled workers, as well as women and workers of color, to join “labor unions,” but the craft-oriented trade unions dominated the Federation. These remained closed to most newcomers and even to women and African-Americans who acquired skills in the same trades. They also insisted on complete jurisdiction over all workers within their chosen domain and opposed other unions seeking to represent those workers. Gompers and the A.F.L. founders made a deliberate choice in 1886 to build institutions based on the interests of mostly skilled workers—to create unions that could survive depressions, hostile courts and repressive employers. They succeeded, but in stressing “pure and simple unionism”—unions organized by occupation or skilled trade, they abandoned their earlier vision of a labor movement organized across occupations and without regard for workers’ skill level. The latter model entails the organizing of workers by industry rather than occupation, and for this reason, it is called industrial unionism.

We can follow the birth of the American Federation of Labor in Massachusetts through the career of union pioneer Frank Foster. A printer by trade, the Thorndike, Massachusetts-born Foster went east to Boston during the early 1880s. Elected president of the Boston Typographical Union in 1882, he figured prominently in both the craft-dominated Boston Central Labor Union (C.L.U.) and the Knights of Labor. From 1883 to 1886, he edited the Order’s *Haverhill Laborer* but in the following year he left the K. of L. and argued that the Knights should give way to the trade unions of the A.F.L. According to Foster, “men occupied at the same calling have more interests in common than men in diverse trades.”

The practical tactics of the trade unions created durable organizations that, for the first time in labor history, survived a major depression. The A.F.L. grew rapidly as craft unions, led by the building trades, extended to cities and towns all over the Commonwealth. Beyond the earliest building-trades unions—the carpenters, bricklayers, painters, and plasterers—new construction unions formed in the 1890s, including the electricians, sheet metal workers, iron workers, and hod carriers, to name a few. Together with the craft unions in the construction trades, skilled workers recognized powerful trade unions in the railroad, printing, metalworking, iron molding, shoe, textile, and cigar-making industries. Craft unions also formed among bartenders and waiters, musicians, bakers, and other tradesmen.

Aware that the particular interests of trades could fracture the labor movement, Gompers and his followers urged trade unions to form state federations. In the Bay State, A.F.L. leaders created the Massachusetts State Federation of Labor in 1887 and asked Frank Foster to edit a new union newspaper, *The Labor Leader*.

That fall the “State Fed” demonstrated its influence in the Commonwealth when its members convinced the legislature to make the first Monday in September an official state holiday. That first Labor Day, more than 20,000 workers marched through the streets of Boston in a well ordered procession and celebrated their new freedom day. In 1890, the Massachusetts Federation of Labor won a reduction in the workday of state employees to nine hours. This reform was one of many achieved to protect workers and extend their rights. Others included the mandatory inspection of workplaces, the prohibition of child labor, the reduction of the work week for women and teenaged workers, and a “prevailing wage law” on government projects that prevented building contractors from bidding too low for public work and thereby undermining workers’ hard-won standard of living.

The Massachusetts State Federation of Labor, founded by 42 local unions in 1887, claimed 115 affiliates by 1907. The body’s legislative director, Frank Foster, became an important public figure in the Commonwealth, important enough to debate President Lowell of Harvard University at Boston’s Faneuil Hall on the pressing issue of the day: strike breaking. Lowell claimed that a person had a right to take a striker’s job, whereas Foster objected, saying that the “scab” was not a hero but a thief.

Besides promoting state federations, Gompers asked A.F.L. state federations to strengthen central labor councils (C.L.C.s). C.L.C.s came under the umbrella of the state federation and were organized on a district-by-district basis, each representing the skilled trade and/or manufacturing unions in the area. The Massachusetts central labor councils organized effective boycotts against abusive employers, persuaded consumers to buy products with a union label, elected worker-friendly public officials, and contributed to striking workers so that no union stood alone.

In 1890, mutual aid helped the Carpenters in many cities strike successfully for the eight-hour day. In New Orleans, where black and white dock workers unions allied, the entire work force closed down the city in 1892. Sympathy strikes increased as various trades honored their brothers’ and sisters’ picket lines.

For example in Holyoke, Massachusetts, in 1892 union carpenters struck for a nine-hour day and employer guarantees that they would hire only union labor. The contractors’ association refused to bargain. When a strike ensued, the Holyoke Central Labor Council organized many other trades, including the union bricklayers and painters to support the Carpenters. The contractors then agreed to a compromise settlement.

The Boston Central Labor Union united all local unions and helped elect Mayor Josiah Quincy IV, who called for the use of union labor on public works and opened a city-owned printing plant staffed by union printers who worked an eight-hour day.

The Boston Central Labor Union frequently called upon its members and public supporters to boycott employers who treated workers unfairly. “When there is a street car strike,” wrote one observer in 1898, “local inhabitants cheerfully walk any distance” because employers who were branded unfair by trade unions came to be seen as unfair by the public as well. Union labels appeared in many store windows and on many products indicating that the producer used union labor and treated employees fairly. Union labels appeared on coats, hats and shoes as well as cigars and in advertisements like the one purchased by the American Brewing Company in Roxbury saying “UNION MEN! DRINK UNION BEER.”

Owing to unity among trades unions and solidarity among workers and consumers, there was, according to reformer Robert Woods “a great improvement in all the conditions of labor” in Boston and many other cities—an improvement made possible by “working class organization.”

However, when strong employers could isolate craft unions, they could be defeated, as was the powerful Amalgamated Association of Iron, Tin, and Steel Workers in the epic Homestead, Pennsylvania, lockout of 1892. Workers struck in response to a pay cut ranging from 18 to 26 percent. Pitched battles ensued between the strik-

ers and more than 300 armed Pinkerton detectives. After several deaths on both sides, the state militia took over the town and the company broke the strike. Unskilled steel mill workers supported the craft union in that do-or-die challenge to great industrialist, Andrew Carnegie, but they were not offered membership in the Amalgamated.

Engaging in sympathy strikes required that unions make enormous sacrifices. In 1894, the year a great depression hit the nation, the new American Railway Union led by Eugene V. Debs agreed to support the car builders' strike in Pullman, Illinois, and called for a boycott of trains hauling Pullman's sleeping cars. The railway unions responded in sympathy and paralyzed the nation's interstate commerce. But when faced with a federal court injunction, other railway craft unions ended their boycott and ignored Debs's call for a general strike. Federal cavalry troops broke the strike in Chicago and Debs was sent to federal prison. This devastating defeat convinced Gompers and A.F.L. officials that massive sympathy strikes would lead to disaster.

The economic crisis of the 1890s crippled many unions, but the A.F.L.'s affiliates survived a major depression for the first time in U.S. history and then grew rapidly, along with new craft unions formed among boot and shoe operatives, electricians, iron workers, "tin knockers," painters and plasterers.

Once the depression ended in 1897, membership in A.F.L. unions more than doubled in four years. Loosely organized unions began to employ walking delegates to collect dues, organize, handle grievances, and bargain with the boss. In the building trades, these "business agents" also assigned work to the members. At the same time, national and district officials assumed more power and control over union affairs and conducted them in a more "business-like" manner.

The labor movement grew rapidly around the turn of the nineteenth century as union membership doubled between 1897 and 1900—when it reached one million—and then it doubled in size again over the next four years.

As A.F.L. unions continued to grow in number, organized labor also grew in political influence. In 1900, for example, major employers willingly joined with Samuel Gompers and other trade union leaders to promote trade agreements that would end costly walkouts, especially sympathy strikes, in return for union recognition and workplace improvements.

As a result, labor unions gained the strength to establish a new era when more and more employers acknowledged their workers' right to strike, to negotiate, to require that new hires be union members, and more: their right to limit the work day to eight hours and, most important, their right to earn what union leaders called "a living wage." Organized labor wanted wage-earning families to achieve the same standard of living as those headed by professionals and shop owners—a standard of living that would sustain a male "bread winner" and his family, allow for homeownership, a healthy diet, and good clothing without requiring his wife and children to work for wages.

The 1900 Industrial Commission appointed by a Republican President William McKinley concluded that "for the average worker," labor unions created "a sense of greater liberty." Rather than sacrificing individual freedom, the trade unionist could ally with fellow workers and gain freedom from the necessity of accepting whatever the employer offered. Furthermore, the federal commissioners declared, only through the organization of labor would it be possible to "introduce an element of democracy into the government of industry."

However, the federal government still refused to recognize or protect the worker's right to join a union, to conduct a strike or boycott, or to engage in collective bargaining with employers. Nor was there any right to work for eight hours a day, for a minimum wage, and under safe conditions. Whatever liberties unions achieved for workers depended entirely on workers' solidarity with one another, as well as on the willingness of employers to bargain in good faith with their employees and then abide by rules that unions helped to create.

Samuel Gompers of the A.F.L. continued to advocate voluntary agreements between union workers and employers to improve workers' lot because he distrusted the legislative process. Although Gompers recognized the importance of labor law reform, he preferred that the terms of employment be subject to contract. He thought, for example, that a minimum wage law would be used as a ceiling for wages and not a floor in bargaining. He also urged unions to maintain their political independence from Democrats and Republicans, so they were free to "reward their friends and punish their enemies."

But others in the house of labor disagreed. They were union workers who wanted their own political party and wanted their government to own and operate factories and railroads, so those who did the work could make the decisions. These workers joined the Socialist Party of America formed in 1901 and led by the union leader Eugene Debs who ran for President five times, each time calling for the creation of a cooperative commonwealth. Shoeworkers in Haverhill and Brockton, the strongest union cities in Massachusetts, elected socialist mayors between 1898 and 1902.

In Massachusetts and other states, labor leaders appealed to their lawmakers to improve the terms and conditions of work despite the national A.F.L.'s stated mistrust of "protective legislation." From 1890 to 1906, Frank Foster, lobbyist for Massachusetts State Federation, mobilized labor's ranks to win reductions in the work-day for state employees. In 1911, legislators allied with labor to reduce the work week of textile workers to fifty-four hours. That year, Massachusetts lawmakers also approved a system of workmen's compensation—a program of income maintenance for injured workers, after intense lobbying by labor and its chief ally, the Boston Chamber of Commerce.

Gompers' mistrust of government was justified, for the judiciary repeatedly ruled against organized labor and for employers. In 1902, the A.F.L.-affiliated Hatters Union called for a national consumer' boycott against a non-union company in Danbury, Connecticut. Using a provision of anti-trust laws—created to curb the growth of corporate monopolies, the hat manufacturer charged that the Hatters Union was engaged in a conspiracy in restraint of trade. The company sued for financial damages and the case made its way to the U.S. Supreme Court, which ruled against the union in 1908. The Court reasoned that the Hatters Union had engaged in an illegal secondary boycott.

During this period the American workforce became increasingly diverse and presented labor with a new challenge. Cities were being filled with millions of inexperienced "hands" from the farms and small towns of America and by impoverished peasant peoples from foreign lands. These immigrants crossed the sea by the millions from southern and eastern Europe to fill employers' insatiable demand for cheap labor. Sometimes, these "aliens" replaced trade unionists defeated in strikes or craftsmen eliminated by new technology. Like the Chinese, these peasant immigrants from Europe were denounced as "greenhorns" who undermined American standards of employment. Despite strong opposition from unions with foreign-born members, the A.F.L. leadership endorsed immigration restriction in 1897.

A.F.L. president Samuel Gompers favored the organization of African-American workers and women, but he faced strong opposition in many affiliated unions because leaders and members wanted to exclude women and workers of color from their industries and trades and from their unions. During the period when all American institutions, public and private, adopted formal or informal types of racial segregation, a few unions made rules barring these workers from membership. Gompers responded to the growing pressure for segregation in all sectors of society by chartering special unions for blacks and women that allowed them a chance to organize but not as full fledged members of the A.F.L.

Some A.F.L. unions embraced a more expansive vision of trade unionism. The Western Federation of Miners adapted the industrial union form and organized "all persons working in and around mines, mills and smelters." The W. F. M.'s militant members engaged metal mine operators in a ten-year civil war in the Rocky

Mountains that cost nearly 200 lives. The socialist-led Brewers Union also chose the industrial model, as did the United Mine Workers of America (U.M.W.A.), founded in 1890 on a constitution that prohibited discrimination based on race, creed or nationality.

The U.M.W.A. became the A.F.L.'s largest affiliate by organizing everyone who toiled in and around the coal mines, even so-called "greenhorns" and "blacklegs" who broke strikes. Thousands of southern and eastern European immigrants helped the Mine Workers Union force soft-coal operators to concede to union demands in 1897, and they supported their union just as strongly in the important 1902 hard coal strike. This huge strike created a national crisis and for the first time, a President of the United States intervened as a neutral force. President Theodore Roosevelt refused to use troops against strikers and instead called for arbitration, which resulted in a compromise, as well as the establishment of the Mediation and Arbitration Commission. The United Mine Workers also organized effectively in the racially-segregated South, eventually unionizing 65 percent of those who toiled in Alabama's coal fields and recruiting more than 20,000 African-American miners across the nation, about half of the A.F.L.'s black membership in 1902.

Not all the strikes and struggles were waged by the "sons of toil" in the nation's heavy industries. Though barred from most skilled trades and most craft unions, women workers organized actively in their own workplaces in the period from 1890 to 1910 when the number of female wage earners doubled to over 8 million. Most worked in the garment and textile industries. Working conditions were often terrible and pay was low. In 1892, Gompers appointed the first woman as a national A.F.L. organizer, Mary E. Kenney of the Bookbinders, and charged her with the mobilization of women in manufacturing. She served a brief term; and then, in 1903, after Kenney married Jack O'Sullivan, a Boston labor leader and newspaper columnist, she helped to found the Women's Trade Union League (W.T.U.L.) at Boston's Faneuil Hall.

The W.T.U.L. membership included working-class women, their middle- and upper-class female allies, and social reformers of the day. The League committed itself to the expansion of working women's liberties, including the rights to a living wage and sanitary and safe working conditions. Despite opposition from many A.F.L. leaders, the League successfully educated and organized thousands of wage-earning women and won legislation protecting women and children from the worst excesses of industrial employment.

The League played a major role in the "great uprising" of 20,000 female shirtwaist (or dress) makers in New City's garment district, a strike that built the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. A majority of the women were Eastern European immigrants and together they waged the first major strike in the needle trades. In the men's clothing industry, immigrant women supported Sidney Hillman's successful effort to create a new industrial union with socialist principles: the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America.

In these challenging times, unionized women participated fully in the movement for women's suffrage (or the right to vote.) Labor women also united with reformers who rallied consumers to oppose child labor and to demand safer, better products made under decent working conditions. Women in unions and consumer groups demanded wages that could lift families out of poverty, but they also insisted that manufacturers charge fair prices for the vital necessities of life.

However, during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when millions of immigrants poured into the United States only a few foreign-born men and women enjoyed union protection. Many craft unions of skilled workers closed their doors to the "unskilled" machine operators from foreign lands. In some industries, immigrants forged their own organizations. Italian contract laborers who were terribly exploited under the slave-like "padrone" system, created the Hod Carriers and Laborers union with their own leaders. Jewish immigrants formed the United Hebrew Trades in New York City. Latino cigar makers in Tampa, Florida built their own organization as well.

Others who were ignored by craft unions followed the militant call for solidarity raised by the radical Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.) formed in 1905 as a rival to the A.F.L. The I.W.W., whose members were known as “Wobblies”, supported mass strikes of unskilled immigrant workers in the steel and textile industries. One result was the historic industrial conflict that occurred in Lawrence, Massachusetts in 1912 after employers slashed wages. Young immigrant women struck the woolen mills in their struggle for “Bread and Roses,” a living wage and decent quality of life.

The “Wobblies” dreamed of forming “One Big Union” across divisions of race, gender and ethnicity—even across national origins. They believed in organizing those workers that the craft unions thought “unorganizable”—including migratory field hands, lumberjacks, and domestic servants. Preaching and practicing solidarity, I.W.W. militants defied segregation laws to support black and white timber workers in Louisiana. They also allied African-Americans with Irish, Polish and Lithuanian dockworkers in Philadelphia.

The Industrial Workers of the World refused to sign contracts with employers and practiced direct actions of all kinds, protests that included slow downs and sit downs, as well as “free speech fights” that crowded city jails with Wobblies in Spokane, Washington, and other cities. A radical social movement rather than a trade union, the I.W.W. created a culture of organizing filled with songs and creative tactics that touched the hearts and minds of the unskilled and the unorganized.

While the I.W.W. rejected all agreements with employers, the A.F.L. found that their trade unions were losing theirs due to a determined drive by business men to weaken and destroy labor organizations, the source of workers’ power and rights. The brief age of the trade agreement ended when employers resumed the offensive; they now demanded an “open shop” to replace the closed, union shop—a workplace in which the employer agreed to hire only union members. Those bosses who could not remove unions waged a war to regain control of the shop floor, using machines and new management schemes to intensify and take back control of production. In response, a new kind of unionism emerged in the A.F.L. as some craft unions amalgamated and some skilled men allied with unskilled workers in sharp struggles over the pace of work and over control of work processes.

A.F.L. unions also faced a terrible and continuing hostility from judges who rejected countless labor laws, issued endless injunctions to stop strikes, and tried to make the boycott illegal. Samuel Gompers responded by denouncing “judge-made law” and defending laws made by the people. Reacting to employers who denied workers’ any liberty except the right to work and the right to quit, the A.F.L. president posed a question and answered it. Would the courts grant workers’ their rights as American citizens? “Rights?” he asked. “Yes, there is no hesitancy on the part of the courts to grant us certain rights—for instance, the right to be maimed or killed without any responsibility to the employer; the right to be discharged for belonging to a union, the right to work long hours for as low pay as the employer can impose.”

In response to employer repression and judicial conservatism, Gompers broke with past practice and took the A.F.L. into partisan politics, endorsing the Democratic Party candidate for President in 1908, William Jennings Bryan. In 1912, union votes helped elected another progressive Democrat, Woodrow Wilson, to the presidency. Many in labor agreed that it was time for working people to reward their friends in government and to punish their enemies.

Thereafter, the Federation reaped many important legislative gains, including the creation of the federal Department of Labor. Other progressive labor laws gave railroad workers the eight-hour day and protected seamen from abuse. These were the first federal actions to extend human rights to workers, and they came directly from the efforts of labor unions.

Most importantly, the Congress articulated the rationale for workers rights in the Clayton Act of 1914. The law promised to free unions from prosecution under anti-trust laws and to reduce the issuing of judicial injunctions against strikes and boycotts. Employers and the courts had justified these union-busting tactics on the grounds that labor was a commodity, just like coal or wheat. According to this logic, unions had no right to strike or boycott actions that would interfere with employers' use of this valuable human resource, which they had purchased with the wages paid to employees. In stark contrast to this logic, the Congress and the President said "the labor of a human being is not a commodity or an article of commerce." It was not, in short, employers' property.

Union membership grew to 2 million by 1914 when organized labor played an integral part in the progressive crusade to reform government. Together with other reformers, organized labor sought to rescue democracy from corrupt political party bosses and from powerful titans of industry, the "robber barons" who controlled the new corporations of the era. These fantastically wealthy men expressed contempt for the "public interest" and bitter hostility to free trade unions. Unions might have grown at a faster rate if union leaders had organized the unskilled, industrial work force more aggressively and if employers had been prevented from using violent repression against the labor movement.

A federal commission reported that in this "age of industrial violence" working people had been "denied their rights" as citizens by employers, provoked by strikebreakers, and brutalized to an "incredible" degree by law enforcement agencies. But the federal government failed to heed a call for reforms to redistribute corporate wealth, to promote collective bargaining, and to extend workers the right to organize, speak and assemble freely.

By the time the U.S. entered World War I in 1917, American workers' hopes had been raised by the many victories their unions had achieved and by the many protective laws progressive legislators had enacted. Working men and women had organized as never before and together they had forced many employers to recognize their unions, to accept their right to bargain over wages and conditions and, even in some cases, to help run industries and make sure they were healthy. Some union visionaries imagined a new era of "industrial democracy" in America.

### ***Part Three: The Struggle for Civil Rights in the Workplace, 1917-1941***

*During this period, workers and their unions overcame unparalleled political and economic obstacles to achieve a "rights revolution in the United States". During the 1920s, when conservative Republicans dominated the government in Washington and here in Massachusetts, legislators and judges stripped workers of all the freedoms and protections that labor had gained during the Progressive Era (1890s-1910s). In 1919, women celebrated winning the suffrage but found they had no rights when they went to work. Anti-union employers used all sorts of tactics, including violence to eliminate unions—the sole force for workers' rights in the United States.*

*But then the Great Depression created an economic and social crisis. Terrible unemployment in each sector of the economy fueled fears that American economic and political institutions would fail and give way to fascism or communism. When workers struck to win union recognition and suffered bloody attacks, the shocked public's worst fears were realized.*

*Alarmed and concerned about the appalling outbreaks of violence, Congress and President Roosevelt acted during the New Deal years to restore order and to bring some measure of democracy to the workplace. They did so by creating a new body of workplace law that protected workers' civil rights, individually and collectively, and they did so by putting the full authority of the federal government into the effort to ensure that wage earners enjoyed freedom of assembly and freedom of association in the workplace as well as in the community*

## Old Conflicts and a New Deal

The A.F.L. grew significantly after the U.S. entered World War I in 1917. Its affiliates became far more aggressive and militant especially in war-related industries. So did the radical Industrial Workers, which organized in the western lumber, mining and wheat producing regions where organizers faced brutal repression at the hands of employers and authorities. The I.W.W. and the Socialist Party had opposed US entry into the European war and were all but destroyed by the federal government which prosecuted its leaders, and by state governments which outlawed radical organizations of all types.

Gompers and A.F.L. leaders ardently supported the war effort and received federal protection in return for making a pledge not to strike for the duration of the conflict. Eugene V. Debs, President of the Brotherhood of Railway Workers, remained a militant pacifist and was imprisoned for ten years for his beliefs.

A.F.L.-affiliated unions organized in big industries like shipbuilding, meatpacking, and textiles where many workers finally won the eight-hour day. In five short years, A.F.L. membership grew by 1 million and Samuel Gompers became an important national figure, a labor statesman. After World War I, he spoke for President Wilson's peace program to make "the world safe for democracy" and helped found the International Labor Organization (I.L.O.).

The A.F.L.'s loyalty paid off in terms of wartime gains, but it earned few dividends at home after the war ended. When employers resumed their anti-union activities, unions flexed new muscle in the great strike wave of 1919. An astonishing four million workers engaged in walkouts and lockouts. New forces joined the movement and struck for recognition: Irish Catholic police officers and telephone operators in Boston, African-Americans in Chicago who toiled in steel mills and on the killing floors of packing houses, and Asian field workers on Hawaiian plantations who united to strike against the growers and the system that divided Japanese and Filipinos.

The political tide had turned, however. The virulently anti-union National Association of Manufacturers (N.A.M.) exploited U.S. patriotism and fears of communism to discredit trade unions. N.A.M. leadership argued that the labor movement was an "Un-American, illegal and infamous conspiracy." Union members soon learned that the federal government would not challenge either N.A.M.'s strikebreaking and blacklisting or state officials' deportation and execution of alleged radicals. The U.S. government no longer favored unionization and mediation of disputes. The President ordered the striking coal miners back to work and did nothing to protect the steel workers from suffering a disastrous defeat in their mammoth national strike. In 1922, the strongest unions in the country, the railroad brotherhoods and city building trades unions, suffered devastating defeats at the hands of employers aided by friendly judges and officials.

It was the "roaring twenties," the age when Henry Ford's inhumane mass production system was the wonder of the world, a time when "the business of America was business". Even as large corporations opposed labor unions, employers sought to co-opt worker loyalty by providing recreational opportunities, welfare schemes, and "employee representation plans" or "company unions."

In this climate, A.F.L.'s leaders could barely hold their own. When the Great Depression hit in 1929, the condition of organized labor declined from unhealthy to deathly. In fact, A.F.L. affiliates hardly survived the horrifying unemployment of the early 1930's and the assaults by employers determined to cut costs and speed up production.

In 1932, Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt soundly defeated Herbert Hoover whose pro-business policies had been discredited by the Great Depression. Roosevelt's New Deal programs gave organized labor a shot in the arm. In the railroad industry, the old brotherhoods kicked out the company unions with the help of an amend-

ed Railway Labor Act. The National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 legitimated workers' right to organize and encouraged millions of factory workers to join A.F.L. locals.

Seizing the opportunity, industrial union leaders rebuilt their organizations. John L. Lewis of the Mine Workers, along with Sidney Hillman and David Dubinsky of the clothing workers' unions, sent their organizers into the field. The response was stunning as men in coal camps and women in garment shops organized themselves into new locals.

Unions formed by skilled workers also took up the cry, "The President wants you to join the union." In big cities, teachers and musicians, waiters and waitresses, cooks and bartenders joined revived "New Deal locals." Newspaper reporters and motion picture actors organized aggressive new "guilds" and the auto industry's highly-paid elite, the tool-and-die makers, formed an association led by radicals.

In 1934, all hell broke loose in American workplaces across the country. General strikes paralyzed Minneapolis, Toledo, and San Francisco—struggles in which labor radicals displaced wary craft union leaders. In his Labor Day radio address that year, John L. Lewis of the Miners called on the A.F.L. to change its policy and encourage workers in "mass industries" to organize themselves into industrial unions.

By 1935 rank-and-file workers had begun to take matters into their own hands and breathed new life into the U.S. labor movement. They allied with the unemployed and community groups, formed local labor parties, joined socialist and communist parties, opposed timid craft union leaders, sent flying squadrons of cars filled with pickets to strike sites, and even seized factories in sit-down strikes.

The number of industrial disputes in Massachusetts shot up from 76 in 1932 to 157 in 1933. That year, five thousand leather workers walked out in Lynn, Peabody, and other towns. The tannery owners brought in scabs but local residents, especially ethnic organizations, supported the strikers. In Wareham, cranberry pickers struck the bogs. Fifteen hundred field hands, mostly Cape Verdeans, struck for union recognition, higher wages, and an end to harsh rule by field bosses. Although this first agricultural strike in the state's history failed, others succeeded during the New Deal years.

Many in Congress feared even more violent disruptions that would hurt economic recovery; some also worried about employers who denied workers' right to organize and created the captive "company" unions; and most agreed with Senator Robert Wagner of New York that workers needed higher wages to increase their purchasing power and to revive the economy. In response, Wagner drafted and Congress passed the National Labor Relations Act (N.L.R.A.) in the spring of 1935.

The Wagner Act, as the N.L.R.A. was also called, not only protected the right to organize, it set up a National Labor Relations Board (N.L.R.B.) to implement the Act. The Board was responsible for prosecuting employers for "unfair labor practices," holding free elections, defining union bargaining units, and promoting collective bargaining between labor and management. The Wagner Act embodied the notion that workers' rights as citizens applied in the workplace as well. For the first time in American history, workers were told that the Bill of Rights still applied when they went to work for their employer. It is for this reason that many in the house of labor dubbed this legislation "labor's Magna Carta".

Because of the N.L.R.A., labor organizing surged again, especially after 1936. Massachusetts union membership rose from only 155,342 in 1932 to 224,000 in 1936. Labor militancy gripped the Commonwealth and the number of work days lost to strikes skyrocketed as workers asserted their right to strike now that it was protected by federal law.

Many industrialists reacted hysterically to the Congress's radical challenge to the supremacy of employers' property rights over workers' civil rights, and vowed to defy the Act.

While the Wagner Act was being tested in court, John L. Lewis again demanded that the A.F.L. affiliates break with its tradition of craft unionism and allow industrial unionism. Failing to change A.F.L. policies, Lewis split from the Federation and led a group of like-minded unionists who in 1935 formed the Committee for Industrial Organization (C.I.O.). The C.I.O. hired hundreds of dedicated organizers and pledged to bring unionism to basic industry.

But before mass organizing could take off, the labor movement needed to return President Roosevelt to office. Opposed by big business, bankers, and most newspapers, F.D.R. won the loyalty of working-class America. To help defend the New Deal and re-elect the President, the A.F.L. and the C.I.O. registered millions of new blue-collar voters, including many immigrants and African-Americans. Labor's "new millions" helped sweep President Roosevelt back into office in 1936. Roosevelt now had a popular mandate to initiate social programs that many in organized labor had long advocated. These included the Social Security program and unemployment compensation. The stage was set in U.S. politics and on the nation's shop floors for the labor movement's great breakthrough.

Encouraged by F.D.R.'s victory and the election of pro-union Democratic governor in Michigan, auto workers at General Motors works seized a key Chevy engine plant in Flint, Michigan and held it until the world's most powerful corporation agreed to sign a contract with the new C.I.O. union, the United Auto Workers. The great Flint sit-down strike of early 1937 set off dozens of plant occupations that winter and spring. Demonstrating their power to halt production, sit-downers demanded union recognition from tough open-shop employers. The strikers wanted more than better pay; they demanded recognition for their unions as a way of reclaiming their human dignity in workplaces where speed-ups had reduced workers to machines. Fearing sit-down strikes in its enormous steel mills, the giant U.S. Steel Corporation, stunned the business world by agreeing to a contract with the Steel Workers Organizing Committee.

As a result of the C.I.O. efforts to organize African American steel workers, Mexican American copper workers, and Asian plantation workers in Hawaii, the labor movement appeared as a forerunner of the civil rights movement in areas of the nation where workers of color faced racism in industry and in society at large. Indeed, throughout much of its history and despite its leaders' prejudices, the labor movement has been the single most integrated institution in the United States.

In March of 1937, the Supreme Court affirmed the constitutionality of the Wagner Act in the historic *Jones & Laughlin* decision. Unions could now petition the national Labor Board to hold elections and charge employers with unfair labor practices. For the first time in history, federal law could be used to protect workers' right to organize and to prosecute anti-union employers as outlaws.

Other important gains followed. A. Philip Randolph used federal labor law to finally win a contract for his Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters with the Pullman Company which had kept two generations of African-Americans in a state of servitude. In 1937, Randolph negotiated the first contract with Pullman, winning union recognition for his union—the first organization of black men ever recognized by a large corporation. As a result of collective bargaining, the Porters, who had earned \$67 for a 240 hour month of work in 1924, earned by the end of World War II as much as \$700 a month. The union had helped these proud black men earn a living wage, so that they could afford to educate their children while working at their jobs with dignity. The contract also achieved a basic measure of humanity for Porters by insisting that each one be called by his own name instead of all being called "George," as had been customary.

As soon as he signed the contract with Pullman, A. Philip Randolph became America's most renowned African-American labor leader and the nation's foremost civil rights leader. His contribution to workers' rights in Massachusetts is honored with an impressive statue located in Boston in the M.B.T.A.'s Back Bay Station. The memorial includes this inscription of Randolph's words: "Freedom is never granted; it is won. Justice is never given; it is exacted. Freedom and justice must be struggled for by the oppressed . . . and the struggle must be continuous."

Due to these union struggles, a new freedom did come to the workplace on the eve of World War II. A more liberal Supreme Court sided with C.I.O. protestors in path-breaking decisions that vastly expanded the right to peaceful picketing, characterizing it as constitutionally protected free speech. The Court also made history by upholding the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, which abolished child labor and established minimum wage and maximum hours. After a century of struggle, the labor movement had achieved its goal of an eight-hour day.

Unions still encountered violent resistance by employers. Outraged by U.S. Steel's capitulation to the C.I.O., other steel corporations mobilized in 1937 to defeat the new industrial union in the Little Steel strike. Southern cotton mill bosses also stopped an organizing drive by the C.I.O.'s Textile Workers' Organizing Committee. The Ford Motor Company maintained a totalitarian system in its plants and kept its workers intimidated. A U.S. Senate committee exposed widespread violations of workers' civil liberties by labor spies, private guards, goon squads and police forces, like those in Chicago who shot and killed ten C.I.O. picketers in the Memorial Day massacre of 1937.

Eventually, C.I.O. unions used federal labor law and other government pressures to force elections in the most hostile steel plants and in the Ford Motor Company, where the U.A.W. carried the day in 1941. It did so after unifying a highly diverse work force of old and new immigrants, Southern whites and blacks, highly skilled tool makers, and less skilled assembly line workers. With federal law on their side, C.I.O. organizers appealed to a new sense of citizenship among the children of European immigrants, of Chicanos, and of black sharecroppers who had seen their parents oppressed as second-class citizens.

The C.I.O. forged a new kind of inclusive Americanism that brought disfranchised working-class people into the mainstream of the democratic process.

Spurred by C.I.O. challenges and changes in labor law, many A.F.L. unions started to organize aggressively. After enlisting local truckers in militant battles, the Teamsters leapfrogged across the nation unionizing over-the-road drivers and warehouse workers. Craft unions, once determined to limit their memberships, now shifted gears. The Carpenters, Electricians, Ironworkers, and Machinists actively recruited factory workers on an industrial basis. By the end of the decade, membership in A.F.L. affiliates had swollen to 5 million, twice as many as the C.I.O.'s unions.

By 1941, A.F.L. and C.I.O. unions represented eight million workers whose numbers accounted for 23 percent of non-agricultural employees, including 34 percent in manufacturing, 48 percent in transportation, communication and utilities, 65 percent in construction, and 72 percent in mining.

When US defense industries started booming in 1941, both A.F.L. and C.I.O. unions began organizing energetically in aircraft plants and shipyards. That spring A. Philip Randolph threatened to lead 100,000 black people in a March on Washington to protest racial discrimination in defense production. Randolph called off the March when President Roosevelt issued an executive order banning discrimination in this labor market and establishing a Fair Employment Practices Commission to monitor employers' hiring practices.

## ***Part Four: The Struggle to Preserve Workers Rights, 1942-1970***

*By the end of World War II, organized labor was a fully developed power in U.S. society and politics and a respected advocate for workers' civil rights. In 1945, more than 12 million workers belonged to trade unions and collective bargaining was widespread throughout the nation's industries.*

*The wartime and post-war labor movements benefited greatly from the earlier establishment of the rule of law in the U.S. workplace, as set out by the National Labor Relations Act. Consequently, the wages of U.S. industrial workers more than tripled during the period from 1945 to 1970.*

*A defense economy also spurred diversification of the U.S. industrial workforce and in turn, trade union membership. Women, African-Americans, and Chicanos, among others, filled jobs and unions vacated by male workers gone to soldier. Wartime workers brought new voices and values to American workers' struggle for civil rights. These newcomers would consolidate their leadership in the trade union movement during the 1950s, '60s, and '70s.*

### *The War at Home*

After the US declared war on Germany, Japan and Italy in 1941, millions of union workers entered the armed forces, and government agencies and employers searched for new "hands" to keep up with war production demands. Pushed to stay at home during the Depression, women now received urgent appeals to do men's work at union wages, like the mythical figure "Rosie the Riveter." Women flooded manufacturing and took pride in their contributions to defense industries.

The A.F.L. and C.I.O. became loyal partners in the war effort. Labor leaders took a no-strike pledge and accepted a wage freeze in return for a voice in federal war production policies and a guarantee that the new defense producers would hire union workers.

Under the brilliant leadership of the C.I.O.'s Sidney Hillman, unions became enormously influential in the Democratic Party by creating a Political Action Committee (P.A.C.) which helped elect pro-union candidates and assured President Roosevelt of an unprecedented fourth term.

Organized labor gained millions of members and exercised significant political influence during World War II. Based on his experience on wartime joint labor boards, Philip Murray, the Steel Workers' President (who had replaced John L. Lewis as C.I.O. chief) proposed the creation of industrial councils of labor and management, umpired by federal officials. These would engage in making joint management and marketing decisions and in setting labor policies.

But the businessmen who dominated wartime production agencies adamantly refused to share the responsibilities of management. Indeed, big business, thrown on the defensive by the Depression, the New Deal and the C.I.O., rallied its forces during the War and prepared to attack "big labor."

When conservative Republicans swept the congressional election in 1946, employers lobbied for drastic restrictions on workers' rights and union powers. In 1947, the Taft-Hartley Act amended the original National Labor Relations Act of 1935 to deprive unions of important freedoms. The law banned the secondary boycott, prohibiting certain sympathy actions taken in solidarity with strikers; it also weakened the strike weapon by allowing federal injunctions and "cooling off" periods in "national emergencies." The Act outlawed the closed shop, a creation of collective bargaining agreements that required employers to hire only union members and to discharge non-union members. Simply put, union membership was a condition of employment in closed shops.

In contrast, the Taft-Hartley Act gave employees “the right to work” in union shops without joining the union.<sup>3</sup> The Act also allowed union members to “decertify” (or terminate their affiliation with) their union. In addition, Taft-Hartley made union officials liable for damages if members went on strike during the term of a contract and, in addition, it required those officials to sign affidavits swearing they were not members of the Communist Party.

The A.F.L. and C.I.O. leaders bitterly denounced Taft-Hartley and President Harry Truman vetoed the measure, but to no avail. Unions now operated under far more restrictive federal laws that aided employers eager to restore their “right to manage.”

Post-war attacks on workers’ rights had a chilling effect on labor’s experimentation with politically progressive and inclusionary unionism.

The A.F.L. and C.I.O. became deeply involved in the Cold War at the international level. Both organizations joined a new International Confederation of Free Trade Unions created to rival a World Federation that included Communist-led unions in other nations. C.I.O. President Phil Murray resisted the wave of anti-Communism sweeping the nation, but in 1949, he bowed to anti-Communist sentiment in the labor movement. Murray supported those demanding a purge of eleven affiliates accused of being “Communist-dominated” and of failing to support C.I.O. resolutions that favored President Truman’s reelection and his Marshall Plan to strengthen western European nations in the Cold War with the Soviet Union.

The purge of the radicals from the C.I.O. demonstrated its willingness to support Cold War policies abroad and to embrace more moderate tactics at home. Equally important, it paved the way for the C.I.O.’s reunification with the A.F.L. in 1955. But the 1949 purge also deprived the C.I.O. of its best organizers, its staunchest enemies of discrimination, and its strongest advocates of a social unionism dedicated to expanding democracy and equality.

In 1952, the new A.F.L. president, George Meany, declared a new era in which unions sought not to “recast American society,” but to achieve a more “modest goal”—“a rising standard of living.” A pragmatic trade unionist who learned the craft of plumbing in the Bronx, Meany reaffirmed the original principles of the A.F.L. These included an emphasis on bread-and-butter issues, that is, job-specific goals, and on pure-and-simple organizing along occupational lines. Meany insisted on the primacy of these principles when the A.F.L. welcomed the C.I.O. back into the Federation in 1955.

The new era saw great gains for unions and their members who now represented 35 percent of the eligible work force. Real wages increased by 30 percent during the 1950s as blue-collar union members equaled or surpassed white-collar earnings, bought more cars and appliances, and moved to new homes in the expanding suburbs. Leisure time increased through paid vacations gained by collective bargaining. Working-class consumption exploded as installment-buying spread. To enhance family income, the number of wage earners among married women doubled. For many workers raised in struggling farm families or in the cold-water flats of poor immigrant neighborhoods, organized labor brought a life of comfort and security denied to their parents and grandparents. For a generation that endured the Great Depression, union contracts finally brought some hope of security through health insurance and pension benefits.

Collective bargaining was good for the whole economy. “Wage-led” growth stimulated an era of unprecedented prosperity that lasted into the early 1970’s.

Yet, many working people lacked the benefits of union contracts. The A.F.L.-C.I.O. and the U.A.W. made substantial contributions to Cesar Chavez’s farm workers movement in the 1960’s—a moral crusade which revived public support for union recognition as an instrument for social justice. However, few other union organ-

izing efforts effectively touched the lives of the rural and urban poor—“the other America” left out of the nation’s rising prosperity.

During this period of tremendous economic growth, labor unions not only raised their members’ standard of living and reduced income inequality; but also the A.F.L.-C.I.O. and many of its affiliates used growing political influence to improve the lives of non-members. The A.F.L.-C.I.O. insisted that a good job with a living wage was a right, not a privilege. It insisted that while workers had a responsibility to do a “fair day’s work”, they also had the right to a voice in the workplace and fair play on the job.

During the administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson, the A.F.L.-C.I.O. initiated, financed and organized the effective campaign for Medicare and supported a wide range of other government programs, including enormous increases in federal funding for public education. Organized labor favored the federal government’s War on Poverty and supported the Equal Pay Act of 1963 which prohibits employers from discriminating based on sex in the payment of wages for equal work. Trade union leaders also endorsed the inclusion of the fair employment practices section (Title VII) in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which prohibits discrimination in employment based on race, religion, national origin, and sex. Furthermore, organized labor overcame the President’s opposition to increasing the minimum wage in 1966 when Congress extended protection to 8 million more workers.

Indeed, in many cases, the A.F.L.-C.I.O. acted more effectively as the legislative agent of the general welfare than as a protector of union special interests—doing “more good for people than any other group in America” in President Johnson’s words. Even after the election of Republican President Richard Nixon, who favored business interests, organized labor helped push through a law safeguarding all workers, the Occupational Health and Safety Act of 1970.

During the 1950s, several unions faced government investigations of corrupt practices. President Meany moved against dishonest union leaders and led the effort to expel corrupt affiliates, including the Teamsters, the Federation’s largest. Meany supported the Landrum-Griffin Act 1959 that prohibited improper activities by labor management, including corrupt practices, but he opposed provisions that deprived elected leaders of the power to clean up their organizations. Labor leaders also criticized the Act’s restrictions on union affairs that had nothing to do with eliminating improper management. Like the Taft-Hartley Act, the legislation of 1959 was aimed squarely at limiting workers’ voice in labor relations.

In the process of fighting racketeers in the unions, Meany challenged an old principle—that the affiliates enjoyed complete autonomy in regulating their own affairs. Meany also followed the lead of A. Philip Randolph who demanded that affiliates remove “white-only clauses” from their constitutions.

As a leading defender of the Cold War, President Meany championed the idea that human rights included workers’ right to join trade unions free of party or government control. The affiliates strongly endorsed this position, but when the A.F.L.-C.I.O. became a strong supporter of the US military involvement in Vietnam, critics within the unions began to call for a change in A.F.L.-C.I.O. foreign policy.

The composition of the union rank-and-file began to shift in the 1960’s as blue-collar jobs shrank and service and clerical jobs expanded. Unorganized “public servants”—including teachers and fire fighters, nurses and clerks, road crews and street sweepers—compared their low wages with unionized workers and demanded equality. They began to organize with the assistance of President John F. Kennedy’s 1962 order permitting bargaining for federal employees. The membership of public sector unions leapt from 400,000 in 1955 to over 4 million in the early 1970s.

Women and workers of color were well represented in unions like the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (A.F.S.C.M.E), which became one of the Federation's largest affiliates. The union of public employees came to the aid of striking Memphis sanitation workers in 1968 when Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated. King's death not only deprived the world of a great moral force for peace and freedom; it removed a leading national advocate of a "Negro-Labor alliance" for justice and equality.

In Massachusetts, public sector workers began affiliating with the A.F.S.C.M.E. on a large scale in the 1940s and 50s. Correction officers affiliated first and highway employees soon joined them, as did employees of the Department of Mental Retardation. The union helped its newest members win health-care protection in 1956 and helped to reform horrendous conditions endured by patients and workers in state mental institutions.

During the 1960s, A.F.S.C.M.E. became the fastest growing union in the Commonwealth as thirty-nine new locals joined it. Together with the Service Employees International Union (S.E.I.U.), A.F.S.C.M.E. began to exert political influence at the State House, where in 1966 the legislature enacted a law allowing for bargaining by public employees on working conditions.

A year earlier, Chapter 763 allowed teachers to engage in bargaining on the full range of issues, including salaries. Public school teachers began to join unions in great numbers at a time when educators earned salaries that amounted to a fraction of those earned by other educated professionals in law, medicine and engineering. The American Federation of Teachers (A.F.T.) grew rapidly in the 1960s, multiplying four fold nationally, while in Massachusetts teachers from most of the state's cities sat down to bargain contracts with local school committees. Thereafter, public school teacher salaries began to rise to a level comparable to those of other professionals and educators began to win a voice in how their students' educational lives could be improved. Before teacher unions existed, teachers and students answered to one person—the principal.

In the 1960s, public schools began to improve and attract more federal funding. Far more students than ever before graduated and enrolled in college. Owing to teacher unionism, educators, once regarded as public servants rather than professionals, achieved greater standing in their communities and became far more involved in public affairs.

During the 1970s, the Massachusetts teachers unions mobilized their members to help secure the enactment of Chapter 622, which assured students access to all education programs, regardless of their race, gender, religion, or national origin. It also lobbied for the Transitional Bilingual Education Act, supporting education programs for students learning English as a second language, and the nationally renowned Chapter 766, which guaranteed appropriate support for a hundred thousand special-needs students.

### ***Part Five: The Struggle to Expand Workers Rights in Our Own Times.***

*Today's workers struggle to preserve their hard-won civil rights in the face of two inter-related challenges: globalization and the shift in the United States from a manufacturing-based economy to one grounded in service and information-based industries. These trends have eroded the nation's manufacturing sector—labor's historic stronghold, and led to repeated attacks on workers' rights in the United States and throughout the world. As a result, workers are suffering from increasing economic insecurity and a profound loss of power at work and in society.*

*"Going it alone" is not a strategic remedy for workers seeking to maintain the "rule of law" in the American workplace. Now more than ever, working men and women need the protections and political voice afforded by collective action and labor organization.*

*Despite the odds, American trade unionists of all backgrounds and identities have pledged themselves to defend the democratic ideals that enliven the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, and twentieth-century labor law. As in the past, today's union members are in the front lines of the fight at home for civil liberties and social and economic justice.*

### The Final Chapter?

The growth of public employee unionism masked a decline of union density in many older industries like shoes, textiles, and garments. Many unions lost members due to new “labor-saving” technology, and the flight of union shops to the right-to-work states in the South. Other industries faced serious competition from imported goods, causing the A.F.L.-C.I.O. to demand new protections for American-made products. The powerful building trades concentrated on big public projects while non-union contractors took over residential construction. Whole occupations disappeared after World War II as new job growth exploded in clerical, service and sales jobs which unions had tended to ignore in the past. As a result, despite the influx of public employees, union membership fell from 30 percent in 1960 to 25 percent in 1980.

Massachusetts witnessed the flight of its clothing, textile, and shoe manufacturing after 1950. Rather than modernize their machinery and business methods, state manufacturers sought to reduce production costs by relocating to the South where non-union, cheap labor was plentiful. This pursuit of low-wage workers fueled de-industrialization, the shrinking of the manufacturing sector, in New England. Textile cities like Fall River, New Bedford, Lawrence, and Lowell suffered terribly from job loss, as did shoe towns like Lynn and Brockton, as well as workers in Boston's garment industry, located in Chinatown.

At this critical moment, the A.F.L.-C.I.O.'s political influence in Washington receded. Likewise, its power in the Democratic Party waned as other groups—women, minorities, consumers, and environmentalists—exercised greater influence. In 1978, the A.F.L.-C.I.O.'s effort to reform labor law and remove barriers to organizing failed, even with a Democratic President and Democratic majorities on Capitol Hill. In the same year Congress shifted tax burdens away from the rich toward the middle class and then deregulated the airline and trucking industries, a move that would encourage union busting.

Over time, unions devoted fewer resources to organizing new members and when they did, they found it more and more difficult to recruit workers under the old National Labor Relations Board rules. Employers hired intimidating anti-union consultants and fired many employees for union organizing.

In 1973, a worldwide decline in profit rates caused partly by the great oil crisis changed the posture of major employers in labor relations. Complaining about competition from foreign producers, US corporations turned against their organized employees. Employers vigorously opposed union organizing, brazenly violated labor laws, broke strikes with “replacement workers,” and arbitrarily demanded numerous concessions or “give backs.” Even when unions agreed to take losses to keep their employers competitive, they suffered from plant closings which cost a half million manufacturing workers their jobs in the 1970's.

In 1981 disaster struck when the Republican President Ronald Reagan sent an important message to employers; it was open season on unions. That year the President fired 12,000 striking air traffic controllers employed by the federal government and replaced them with scabs. The A.F.L.-C.I.O.'s new president Lane Kirkland responded by rallying 400,000 union members on Solidarity Day to protest the busting of the air traffic controllers' union and Reagan's reactionary anti-worker policies.

But the attack on unions only accelerated as employers demanded massive concessions from unions during negotiations and as employers provoked strikes with the confidence that they could now get rid of union members with permanent replacements. Federal labor law, now administered by Republicans, worked against

the workers it was supposed to protect. Union density (the percent of union membership in a locale or industry) continued to fall, especially in the private sector where employer hostility was ferocious.

Under these hard circumstances, local unions and their allies fought heroic battles for justice and began to demand much more from their national organizations. The tradition of a service model of unionism—with its focus on administering the contract and bargaining for wages and benefits, had delivered the goods in the prosperous post-war years. But this model had left labor unions unprepared to fight for their survival against hostile employers and anti-union public officials. In a number of struggles local strikers allied with community groups and won the hearts and minds of the public. They also turned to the civil rights movement's tradition of peaceful resistance, adopting tactics for community mobilization and civil disobedience unknown to organized labor for decades.

During the early 1990's a chorus of voices arose within the A.F.L.-C.I.O. demanding the changes necessary to rebuild organized labor and to create a new kind of workers' movement, one having a broad agenda of social change. In 1995, the A.F.L.-C.I.O. convention elected a new leadership team for change: John Sweeney as President, Linda Chavez-Thompson as Executive Vice President, and Richard Trumka as Secretary-Treasurer.

The "New Voice" leaders immediately took steps to revitalize the A.F.L.-C.I.O. and provide leadership for a union revival. They reorganized old departments and created new ones staffed by younger activists. They expanded the A.F.L.-C.I.O. Executive Council and added a number of women and people of color to better reflect the composition of the new work force. For the first time, the Federation created an organizing department and challenged affiliates to make organizing a priority. The "New Voice" team established an entirely new department of international affairs pledged to promoting solidarity among workers and unions around the world.

Since 1995, organized labor has emerged more clearly as the nation's main hope for protecting democracy and economic security in a harshly conservative political environment. The A.F.L.-C.I.O. also appeared as the leading advocate for international worker solidarity in a world economy dominated by global corporations accountable only to bankers and profit takers. Furthermore, as President Sweeney promised, organized labor looked and acted more like "a social movement" that represented working people throughout the society, that reached "beyond the workplace and into the entire community."

In Massachusetts an enormous share of the new jobs created during the economic expansion of the 1990s were held by immigrants, but most of these low wage workers are not yet protected by unions. An exceptional group is the cleaning workers of the greater Boston area who are members of the Service Employees International Union and who struck for better wages in 2002. Two years earlier, the A.F.L.-C.I.O. launched a campaign to protect the human rights of foreign-born workers who are exploited by employers and subject to unfairly harsh treatment under the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. This effort is a first step to extend immigrant workers civil rights to the workplace, where the best protection for human rights and economic security is a union contract.

### **The Massachusetts A.F.L.-C.I.O.**

During the years since the economic crisis of the 1970s, Massachusetts union members have faced the same challenges their sisters and brothers faced all over the U.S.A. Not only did the state lose thousands of union jobs in manufacturing, unionized public employees suffered from several budget cuts based on radical tax reductions that benefited businesses and wealthy people and hurt poor and working people. During the first and second gubernatorial terms of Michael Dukakis, working people gained many benefits mostly as a result of advocacy by the Massachusetts A.F.L.-C.I.O. and its supporters in the State House.

Since 1990, Republican governors have destroyed many of the public supports working people enjoyed. The safety net that protects the unemployed, the disabled, and the victims of discrimination has been shredded. Public education, public housing, public welfare, and public safety have all suffered greatly from poor funding and unjust tax policies. Through these difficult years, the Massachusetts State Federation steadily increased its involvement in state government in order to elect worker-friendly candidates to the legislature, to preserve and protect workers rights, and to defend workers' economic and social security.

Today, the Massachusetts A.F.L.-C.I.O. is a state federation of over 700 local unions drawn from over fifty affiliated international unions with a membership of 400,000 employees and their families. (For this reason, Massachusetts AFL-CIO and the Federation are interchangeable terms.)

While the Massachusetts economy suffered the loss of unionized manufacturing jobs and from drastic reductions in the ranks of unionized public employees, the A.F.L.-C.I.O. refused to concede to employer's demands for greater profits at the expense of workers' security. Instead the State Federation of Labor became more active than ever throughout the Commonwealth under the presidencies of Arthur Osborn, (1979-1990) and Joseph Faherty (1991-1998).

As Secretary Treasurer in both administrations, Robert Haynes served in a variety of public roles representing working people, including several terms as a Trustee of the University of Massachusetts. When Haynes was elected president of the Federation in 1998, he continued his advocacy for high quality public education from kindergarten to medical school. He led the effort to increase the Massachusetts A.F.L.-C.I.O. scholarship fund to the extent that over \$666,000 is awarded each spring to college bound high school graduates with the best scores on this labor history exam. During Haynes' presidency, the scholarship fund has grown. So has the support of organized labor for the community and state colleges, the four state university campuses, and the UMass Medical School in Worcester. On Labor Day 1998, President Haynes helped to raise \$5 million for a new cancer research center located there, and the following year led a Labor Day Walk to Cure Cancer, which raised \$300,000. He also helped make it possible for UMass to develop one of the best labor education systems in the nation through the research and teaching programs offered by the labor studies centers at Amherst, Boston, Dartmouth and Lowell.

Since 1998, the State Federation of Labor has developed the best programs for work force development in the US. The Massachusetts A.F.L.-C.I.O.'s Education and Training Department offers a variety of programs to aid workers in gaining training and new employment.

Haynes also helped broaden the leadership of the State Federation that is now led by three executive vice presidents and Treasurer Kathleen Casavant, the first woman to serve as an elected state official of the A.F.L.-C.I.O. In addition, an executive council of 60 men and women, including the heads of regional Central Labor Councils, helps make policy for the organization.

Through this structure and through the efforts of local unions affiliated with the A.F.L.-C.I.O., workers have a voice in state government and in the making of public policy. Organized labor has made a difference in the election and re-election of worker-friendly representatives to the US House and Senate, ensuring that we have officials in Washington who support legislation that protects working people and defends their rights. The A.F.L.-C.I.O. is equally involved in local and state elections and various ballot questions in which it is often the only voice for working people against the voices of business interests who oppose fair taxation and fair wage laws.

In 1995 and again in 1999, the Mass A.F.L.-C.I.O. was instrumental in winning legislative approval for the highest state minimum wage in the nation. The Federation was also credited with the passage of a living wage law by the Boston City Council, requiring the

municipality to pay workers no less than \$8.71 per hour, a rate of pay that in the year 2001 was considered the poverty line for a family of four living in the city. In addition, organized labor is responsible for ensuring that the Commonwealth enforces its laws protecting fair wages on public projects.

In recent years, the A.F.L.-C.I.O. has responded aggressively to employer violations of workers' right to freedom of expression and freedom of association and to employer exploitation of immigrant workers who are not yet citizens. It has done so by mounting public campaigns to defend the right to organize and to protect the rights of immigrant labor.

The Federation's mission is to improve and strengthen labor unions and to provide a new voice to working people in their jobs, in their communities and in the global economy. It seeks to expand the role of organized labor and enhance the voice of working people in several important ways:

- to ensure economic security for all
- to improve public education in all of its forms
- to protect the right to organize and to speak freely in the workplace
- to create and support effective programs for workforce development
- to advocate for fair and progressive tax policies
- to demand accessible, affordable and quality health care, housing and child care
- to support anti-discrimination laws

At the unfolding of the new millennium, the working men and women of Massachusetts can take pride in their achievements. Their dreams of freedom and their demands for equal rights have made America a more democratic society. Their unions have brought justice and dignity to the workplace. But as working people enter the 21st century, they face troubling challenges, much like the ones their fore bearers confronted in the previous century.

Immigrants still earn poverty wages, children still work in dangerous jobs, and women and workers of color suffer job discrimination and harassment. Likewise, the greed of the late 19th century robber barons has reemerged in the unethical behavior of corporate CEOs. The media is filled with stories of individuals who have destroyed decent jobs in search of higher returns on investments, pocketed other people's money for their own selfish ends, and broken their commitments to retired employees.

America's workers face many new challenges as well. Nearly a decade of unprecedented growth in jobs and profits ended with shocking abruptness. Many employers began the new century by slashing jobs, cutting benefits and reducing full-time positions to part-time jobs with no benefits, taking advantage of immigrants and other vulnerable workers. The purchasing power of the dollar has steadily eroded. The work week has been growing longer and longer. More and more people are taking second and third jobs. Millions of workers cannot afford childcare, health care, or adequate housing. America's most successful safety net, Social Security is threatened with privatization. But they need not live and work without hope.

The union movement represents the only collective voice for those who do the work, the only force capable of resisting the relentless forces of the competitive market, the only movement that speaks for all working people—the unionized and the nonunionized, the full-time and the part-time, the highly paid and the poorly paid.

In an era when the virtues of hard work and public service seem to have been forgotten in the quest for easy money, union men and women still embody, day in and day out, the values upon which America was built. They still perform an honest day's work in jobs rarely depicted on television—in dirty, dangerous jobs in mining, construction, manufacturing and transportation, as well as in high-risk public safety jobs, in stressful offices and school rooms, in nursing homes and hospitals, in airports and hotels. They still look out for one another and

take care of each other. In a competitive world, they still depend on cooperation. In an individualistic society, they know the value of solidarity.

In the tragic aftermath of the terrorist attacks that killed so many Americans on Sept. 11, 2001, it seemed as though these precious virtues and selfless values would be recognized once again. In the moving hymns of praise sung to the victims and the many heroes of Sept. 11, thousands of them union members, America seemed to appreciate more than ever the values the union movement has stood for throughout its history.

But too much of this acclaim seems to have been empty praise. Less than a year after the firefighters, construction workers and public employees were hailed as heroes, anti-worker business and government leaders are waging brutal attacks on their collective bargaining rights, wages and jobs. Even as workers struggle to retain their hard-fought gains, the union movement's story often is distorted by employers and journalists, and frequently neglected in textbooks and on television programs.

It's time for union men and women to tell labor's untold story and let America know the union movement stands behind working people now—as it has in the past. In the face of all this adversity, the men and women of the A.F.L.-C.I.O. are, as they always have been, determined to fight for economic justice, to protect and defend democracy and to act on the moral imperative that an injury to one is the concern of all.

Workers will need this kind of labor movement in the twenty-first century—one that will be even stronger and even more able to take on the challenges of life and work in an unpredictable global economy, a movement that will carry on the struggles for justice and dignity in the workplace that echo through two centuries of our nation's history.

<sup>1</sup> To learn more about the “Union Difference” for today's working youth, men, and women, visit <http://www.A.F.L.C.I.O.org/aboutunions/joinunions/whyjoin/uniondifference/>

<sup>2</sup> The Pinkerton Detective Agency supplied employers with detectives who spied on and broke up union meetings and pickets. Pinkertons, as they were called, resorted to armed violence to achieve employers' goal of breaking the union's back. Not surprisingly, Pinkerton detectives were notorious among trade unionists.

<sup>3</sup> After passage of the National Labor Relations and Taft-Hartley Acts, state governments (especially in the south) made it illegal to make union membership a requirement of employment, the theory being that non-union workers had a “right to work” without restrictions imposed by collective bargaining agreements.

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## Notes

