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Labor History Study Guide

2018-2019

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Annual Scholarship Awards Program

Labor History Study Guide
2018-19

Authored By: Mitchell Manning & Eve Weinbaum, UMass Amherst Labor Center with editing assistance from MA AFL-CIO Scholarship Committee, American Federation of Teachers, Massachusetts

For more information, contact Carla Connolly, Massachusetts AFL-CIO Scholarship Coordinator (781) 324-8230 or cconnolly@massaflcio.org
Dear Student:

We are excited to announce a new study guide for the Massachusetts AFL-CIO Labor History exam for the 2018-19 school year. The following guide has been prepared by scholars at the UMass Amherst Labor Center in conjunction with our Scholarship Committee, consisting of members of the American Federation of Teachers Massachusetts, among others.

We hope that you will find this guide engaging and eye opening. Unions have a proud and exciting history of improving the quality of life for all working people and being on the frontlines of social change and we see the exam as an invitation to learn more about the union movement in the Commonwealth and the country.

The test itself will consist of one essay question and a 30 question multiple choice section whose answers will be clear through careful reading of the study guide. As you read the guide, many terms are bolded so you can read the corresponding definition in the attached glossary.

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.

Sincerely,

Steven A. Tolman
President, Massachusetts AFL-CIO
Union FAQs!

What is a union?
A union is a group of workers who come together to improve their working conditions through collective action and negotiating contracts around wages, hours, and working conditions.

What types of workers have unions?
The first groups of workers to form unions were artisans, railway workers, miners, factory workers, and construction workers. However, now unions represent an incredibly diverse group of workers including nurses, bus drivers, writers, engineers, teachers, office workers, flight attendants, farm workers, actors, firefighters, graduate and undergraduate student workers, and many more.

How does a union work?
All unions work in slightly different ways, but there are three principles of almost all unions:
1. They are democratic
2. The highest governing body in a union is the membership
3. They are completely funded by their members through union dues
The point of a union is to represent all workers in a particular bargaining unit which is a category in the workplace. Members make decisions for their unions and elect leaders to represent them. Groups of workers can vote to join a local union, which is usually defined in a particular workplace or region, and the local union falls within a larger national or international union. For example, the Resident Assistant and Peer Mentor Union at UMass Amherst is part of the UAW Local 2322, which is a part of the United Auto Workers international union.

How do workers form a union?
Forming a union is simple in theory, but can be difficult in practice. When workers want to form a union it usually begins by several folks coming together to share common concerns or ideas for improvement at work. These workers would then talk to a local union and work with organizers to build support for the union among the other workers. If it seems like most workers at a workplace are interested in organizing a union, they can show this support through a card-check or through an election. A card-check is when employees sign union authorization cards showing their support for a union in the workplace. When more than 50% of employees submit cards, the employer can recognize the union voluntarily. If the employer refuses to do so, workers can contact the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to hold a secret-ballot election where workers can vote on whether or not they wish to form a union. If employees vote for the union in the official election, the employer must negotiate with the workers.

What benefits do union workers have?
Being in a union means that you can come together collectively to voice your concerns in your workplace, and work with others to create concrete changes. Union workers bargain a new contract every few years to improve their wages, hours, and working conditions. While all
workers can try to negotiate over their wages, hours, and working conditions, if workers do not have unions they must ask for a raise individually, and they do not have any legal protection. In fact, if a manager does not like a non-union worker, they can fire that worker for any reason. A worker has no job security without a union. With a union, collective action is protected by law and employers need to have just cause to discipline or fire a worker. Union workers usually benefit from higher wages, healthcare benefits, better workplace safety, more voice in their company’s policies, and much more.

What are Public Sector Unions vs. Private Sector Unions?
There are two main types of unions: private sector unions and public sector unions. Private sector unions are formed at private companies. Public sector unions are formed at government-run institutions such as public schools, the postal service, public universities, police and fire departments. Under the Wagner Act (also known as the National Labor Relations Act), all private-sector employees have the right to form unions. The Wagner Act does not cover public-sector employees; each state has its own laws regulating labor organizations. In Massachusetts, government employees including teachers are protected by federal laws as well as Chapter 150(e), the state law that gives public-sector employees the right to unionize and bargain collectively.

Why do union members pay dues?
Union members pay dues to financially support the union to work on behalf of all workers. Union dues pay for union organizers and staff salaries, legal fees, strike funds, and much more. Without paying dues, workers would not be able to afford many of the legal protections that are afforded to them by being in a union.

Do unions participate in electoral politics?
Because labor unions are mostly democratic (with a small “d” meaning that the members make organizational decisions), political engagement varies depending on the union. Most unions do
some political work via the international union, in the locals, or in working groups or caucuses. Some unions make endorsements of political candidates, and some unions actively work to register members to vote and encourage political activity. All of these decisions vary depending on the union and what the membership and leadership decides. Many unions engage in advocacy around political issues that matter to their members, including minimum wage, health care, and more.

What does “Right to Work” mean?
“Right to work” is not what it sounds like — it does not give anyone the right to work. Instead, it refers to legislation that weakens unions by allowing workers to benefit from union representation without paying dues or agency fees to cover the costs of the union’s work. Workers have the option to benefit from the union’s work without contributing to it in any way. Unions often call this “right to work for less” because states with these laws generally have lower rates of unionization, lower wages, and fewer protections for working people. In 2018, the Supreme Court decided in Janus vs. AFSCME that public-sector unions cannot require workers to pay fees (sometimes called “fair share fees” or “agency fees”) to cover the costs of bargaining contracts and advocating for workers in a workplace. The Janus case, as well as other right-to-work ideology, is promulgated by billionaires and right-wing organizations intending to weaken unions by making them suffer financially.

Right-to-work vs rights of workers / Source: macleodcartoons.blogspot.com
A Few Important Labor Activists

**Harriet Tubman (1822 - 1913)**

Harriet Tubman was born into slavery in Maryland during the early 1800s. In her late twenties, she escaped her master and traveled to Philadelphia, and then returned to save her family. For the next ten years, Tubman was a “conductor” in the Underground Railroad and guided over 300 slaves to freedom. Harriet Tubman was a leading figure in abolitionism, the movement to end slavery. She helped John Brown with the raid on Harper’s Ferry, an armed slave revolt that, while ultimately unsuccessful, caused discussion and debate among Northerners and Southerners and called into question the legitimacy of slavery. During the 19 trips she took to free slaves in the south, Tubman created new strategies to avoid danger, including leaving on Saturday nights so newspapers could not print runaway notices, and carrying a drug to sedate crying babies. As you will learn later in this guide, Harriet Tubman’s work is an integral part of the beginning of labor history in the US because slavery was the result of increased demand for labor, and abolitionists who fought against it were participating in strikes and other forms of withholding labor. This ultimately laid the groundwork for unions and labor activism today.

**César Chávez (1927 - 1993)**

César Chávez was a Mexican American farm worker, labor leader, and Latinx civil rights activist. After years of facing prejudice for being Mexican as he was working various jobs in the army, as a ranch hand, and in a lumber company, he decided to become an organizer for the Community Services Organization (CSO). CSO was a Latinx civil rights group and Chávez’s job was urging Mexican Americans to register to vote. In 1958, he became the national director of CSO. Chávez, along with Dolores Huerta, left CSO and founded the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) in 1962. This organization is now called the United Farm Workers (UFW); it is the nation’s largest union of farmworkers with over 10,000 members. The main goal of the NFWA was to advocate for farm workers’ rights to higher wages and to collectively bargain, and the union was successful in joining forces with...
other labor organizations such as the **AFL-CIO** to protest, **boycott**, and **strike** for farm worker rights. Up until Chávez died in 1993, the NFWA and UFW were still successful in fighting for farm worker rights, but when powerful agriculture companies fought back, the union was weakened. César Chávez is considered a hero by farm workers and other workers all over the world.

**Eugene V. Debs (1855 - 1926)**
Eugene Debs was a leader in the labor movement and in politics. He was active in the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and later co-founded the American Railway Union, the Industrial Workers of the World, and the Socialist Party of America. As President of the American Railway Union, Debs helped broaden industrial unionism (a form of unionism where all workers in an industry, such as auto workers, become unionized) and advocated that the union should be for all workers regardless of skill -- unlike many unions at the time that wanted to represent only highly skilled workers. Debs went to jail for leading an illegal **strike**, but it only strengthened his resolve to keep organizing workers. As Debs became more radicalized, he formed the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) which sought to take control of industry. The IWW believed there should be “one big union” as opposed to many small craft unions, and its leaders disagreed with labor organizations that accepted capitalism and sought to work with industry. The IWW was founded on the ideal of a peaceful workers’ revolution and aimed to organize the entire working class in solidarity. Debs eventually ran for president of the United States five times as a Socialist, and then ran for Congress in an attempt to establish a more socialist U.S.

**Mother Jones (1837 - 1930)**
Mother Jones, whose real name was Mary Harris Jones, was a community organizer and a prominent labor organizer in the late 1800s. She worked with the Knights of Labor and the United Mine Workers union, and she co-founded the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). She was called “the most dangerous woman in America” by U.S. District Attorney Reece Blizzard, because she was so successful at organizing mining families against mine owners. Mother Jones’s approach to organizing was much different from most people at the time because she included African-American workers, women, and children when organizing **strikes**. Due to her incredible success,
Mother Jones was often banished from mining towns and jailed many times. Mother Jones was also instrumental in organizing against child labor, eventually leading a march of 100 children to President Theodore Roosevelt’s home on Long Island, to protest the use of children working in mines and silk mills.

**Samuel Gompers (1850 - 1924)**

Samuel Gompers was the first president of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) (1886 -1894 and 1895-1924), the largest coalition of labor unions in the United States. Under his guidance, the AFL’s influence grew in the US and abroad. While some unions were focused on generalized strikes and political action, Gompers used a different approach that revolved around three principles, which he thought would be most effective to win rights for union workers. The first of his three principles was craft and trade unionism. As opposed to Eugene Debs, who wanted everyone to unionize into one general union under the IWW, Gompers favored more specialized unions by trade and craft.

Gompers also promoted “pure and simple unionism,” an ideology that advocated against unions becoming very politically involved and simply focus on improving the economic conditions of members. While many unions and labor organizations had political affiliations and endorsed candidates and political parties, Gompers thought that the labor movement would be more successful if it focused on action in the workplace, improving wages and workers’ rights rather than forming political coalitions. Finally, Gompers believed that the labor movement should practice political nonpartisanship and focus on supporting candidates who were on the side of labor, no matter what political party they represented.

While Gompers wished for a nonpartisan and apolitical labor movement, labor rights were increasingly under attack and under his leadership, the AFL launched a campaign to elect more labor leaders to political office. This favorable shift had a lasting impact and led to worker-friendly policies such as the New Deal.

**Ai-jen Poo (1974 - present)**

Ai-jen Poo is the Executive Director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance. In 2000, she co-founded Domestic Workers United in New York, an organization of nannies, house cleaners, and caregivers. Lead by Poo, the group fought a seven year battle to pass the Domestic Workers’ Bill of Rights which entitled this group of workers to overtime pay, one day off per week, protection from discrimination, and three days of paid leave per year. Poo was recently instrumental in the Department of Labor’s change to include caretakers of elderly and disabled persons in federal minimum wage...
and overtime protections. Her focus is largely on building coalitions and finding common ground across diverse groups of people to leverage collective power and improve the working conditions of domestic workers. Her campaign, Caring Across Generations, aims to change long-term care in the US by providing better care for elderly and disabled people while improving job quality for caretakers.

**Portraits of Individual Workers**

**Harriet Hanson Robinson (1825-1911)**

When she was ten years old, Harriet Hanson Robinson went to work at a brand new textile factory in Lowell, Massachusetts. With the promise of a great job, Harriet left her family’s home and moved into a boarding house next to the mills in 1835. Harriet’s father had died when she was young, and she was pleased to get a job and to be able to contribute to her family, and to help put food on the table. Harriet was excited to be a “bobbin girl” or “doffer,” racing down the aisles replacing bobbins full of thread with empty bobbins, so that the machines never had to stop working.

A group of Boston capitalists was building a major textile manufacturing center in Lowell. The factories recruited girls from rural New England to do the work. The Boston investors made huge profits but in the early 1830s, the increasing number of mills meant overproduction of textiles, and prices began to fall quickly. The owners responded by cutting the workers’ wages and speeding up the pace of work. The young women organized to protest these wage cuts. They organized one of the first strikes of cotton factory workers in the U.S., in 1834, and another in 1836.

The strike of 1836 began when the girls were told that their wages would be cut by at least one dollar a week – when their total wages were about seven dollars a week. On top of dangerous, dirty, and exhausting working conditions, the wage cut was the last straw. Harriet Robinson remembered how the strike began, when she was eleven years old:

“One of the girls stood on a pump, and gave vent to the feelings of her companions in a neat speech, declaring that it was their duty to resist all attempts at cutting down the wages. This was the first time a woman had spoken in public in Lowell, and the event caused surprise and consternation among her audience.”

Eventually at least 1500 girls walked out from Harriet’s factory, marching in a procession down Lowell’s streets. They sang songs including this parody of a song called “I won’t be a nun.”

"Oh! isn’t it a pity, such a pretty girl as I-
Should be sent to the factory to pine away and die?
Oh! I cannot be a slave,
I will not be a slave,
For I’m so fond of liberty
That I cannot be a slave."

When the strike started, each group of workers had to decide whether to walk out or not. “The girls in my room stood irresolute, uncertain what to do, asking each other, “Would you?” or “Shall we turn out?” and not one of them having the courage to lead off. I, who began to think they would not go out, after all their talk, became impatient, and started on ahead, saying, with childish bravado, "I don’t care what you do, I am going to turn out, whether anyone else does or not;" and I marched out, and was followed by the others. As I looked back at the long line that followed me, I was more proud than I have ever been since at any success I may have achieved, and more proud than I shall ever be again until my own beloved State gives to its women citizens the right of suffrage."

The workers won their fight and the wage cuts were reversed. Harriet and her mother were both fired from their jobs, and when they returned to the boarding house where they lived, they were told they were no longer welcome in company housing. But they found jobs in other mills and continued working. Over time, wages continued to fall as competition between mills intensified – and workers continued to organize and protest. Harriet Hanson Robinson continued to be an activist for women’s rights and workers’ rights, including women’s right to vote.

**Francisco Jimenez (1943 - present)**

Francisco Jiménez never went to school in September or October when he was a child. His parents were migrant workers, and his job was to help them with the harvest. Starting at the age of six, he worked for 12 hours a day, seven days a week in the California fields. From late summer through September, Jiménez and his family worked in the strawberry fields in Santa Maria, California. Then they would travel 250 miles to San Joaquin Valley to pick grapes through the end of October. In November, they would move to Corcoran to pick cotton by hand until late December, while living in tents in the fields.

The Jiménez family had crossed the border into the United States from Tlaquepaque, Mexico when he was four years old in 1947. Francisco later wrote about the experience in his book, *The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child*:

> “We crossed without documentation … we came here for the same reason that many immigrant families come to the U.S.: looking for a better life for their children and their children’s children,” said Jiménez.

There was no stability in the children’s lives – they moved between homes and tents from month to month, and never knew when or where they would attend school. When they did attend school, it was very difficult for the immigrant children. In schools where only English was spoken, Jiménez remembers, "My first experience in school was very traumatic simply because I couldn't speak, and I couldn't communicate with the teacher, and I couldn't understand what she was saying... It scarred me for life." He failed the first grade, but Jiménez persisted, eventually becoming student body president of his high school and graduating with a 3.7 grade point average. Along the way there were many tough times, including when the family was caught by “La Migra” – the U.S. immigration authorities – and deported back to Mexico. A border patrol
officer came to Jiménez’s eighth-grade class and took him away. The family was fortunate to find a way back, this time on a legal footing, when a Japanese sharecropper they had worked with agreed to sponsor them.

Jimenez said that education was what gave him hope. When he was in sixth grade, he met a Portugese-American teacher, Mr. Lema, who helped him learn English during his lunch hour. Though Jiménez did not stay in the school long, he said the kind teacher "planted the seed" -- despite poverty, immigration challenges, and grueling work in the fields, Jimenez was motivated to go to college and then to graduate school, ultimately becoming a professor of Ethnic Studies at Santa Clara University and even being named Professor of the Year by the Carnegie Foundation. Jiménez has used his personal and academic experiences to urge young Latinx people to transform their lives through education, the way he was able to do in his journey from picking vegetables and fruits in the fields, to teaching at a university.

**German Lopez (1990 - present)**

When writers and staff at Vox Media decided to organize a union in 2017, German Lopez opposed the idea. Lopez, a senior writer at the website Vox.com, tweeted a message saying “I am against #VoxUnion.” His opinion was that Vox was “a generous company” and “some people want to take advantage of that.” Lopez’s Twitter feed exploded with comments from those who agreed and disagreed with him.

Two weeks later, Lopez had learned more about unions, and he stated publicly that he had changed his mind. What convinced him? His coworkers reminded him that, although things were good for him at the moment, the company’s generosity was not set in stone, and at any time new management could take away the benefits he enjoyed.

The organizing effort at Vox was part of a growing union movement among online media companies. Lopez had come to Vox from a small Cincinnati newspaper, and considered himself lucky to get the job at the age of 25. He moved to Washington, DC, with his husband. He was thrilled to have the resources to work with a tech and data team that made his work easier and more satisfying. But shortly after he arrived, he felt the financial uncertainty within the industry. Workers at other websites, including Vice Media, ThinkProgress, Salon, Thrillist, MTV News, and HuffPost organized unions and negotiated contracts with the owners, winning improved job security, wages and benefits.

In December 2017, Lopez posted that he had signed a union card. Shortly after that, he and his coworkers voted to join the Writers Guild of America East, which represents many groups of digital media employees. The union was recognized by Vox, and the publisher stated that they expected the union to improve the workplace and make Vox a great company. The workers were relieved that major decisions about their wages and working conditions could never again be made without input from the people doing the work.
Labor and Immigrant Rights

With the exception of people whose ancestors were indigenous to this land and those whose ancestors were brought to the U.S. as slaves, this country is made up of generations of immigrants and refugees. There are currently 47 million immigrants in the US, many of whom work closely in and with the labor movement and community organizations to advocate for workers and social equality for everyone. The most common pathway to immigration is through sponsorships for work visas, so labor law and immigration law are largely intertwined.

In the late 19th century and early 20th century, many Americans were concerned about the influx of immigrants. Anti-immigrant sentiment became prevalent, leading to passage of anti-immigration legislation. The American Federation of Labor (AFL) passed resolutions in favor of literacy tests for immigrants designed to keep unskilled workers from immigrating. They favored the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which prohibited immigration of Chinese laborers, and wanted it to expand to include other immigrant workers. At the time, many unions feared that new waves of immigrants would threaten job prospects for US citizens during economically turbulent times. Ironically, proponents of anti-immigration legislation included the United Farm Workers, founded by Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta, who were afraid that undocumented immigrant workers would undermine union labor in the US -- because new undocumented immigrants would be willing to work in poor conditions and for low wages. The UFW even attempted to prevent Mexican immigrants from entering the US by setting up a “wet line” along the southern border. Employers pitted U.S.-born workers against immigrants, and used the conflict to their advantage. In many industries, employers relied on immigrant labor when locking out their workforces and breaking strikes.

In 1986, the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) was passed, setting standards and restrictions for immigrants. The IRCA created a guestwork policy that allowed immigrant workers to enter the US for seasonal agricultural work, offered amnesty for undocumented immigrants who entered the US before 1982, and penalized employers for hiring undocumented workers. The AFL-CIO supported the bill because they believed that punishing employers would stop undocumented immigrants from entering the US to compete with union members, while many labor activists opposed the bill. After the IRCA passed, coalitions organized between immigrant rights groups, worker centers, and unions, to support undocumented immigrants applying for amnesty. The coalitions’ work was important in spreading a pro-immigration message in the labor movement. This led to more organizing of immigrant workers through workers centers and labor unions.
Immigrant workers continued to organize, within the AFL-CIO and in their own workplaces. As a result, in 2000, the AFL-CIO dramatically changed its position and called for undocumented immigrants to be granted citizenship. The national federation passed a formal resolution in 2002 that officially embraced the cause of immigrant workers in the United States. The AFL-CIO promised to actively campaign for new laws to benefit immigrant workers and their families, including the right of immigrant workers in the U.S. to live and work in this country, to become citizens, and to unite with their families in the U.S.

In 2003, the AFL-CIO along with its affiliates that represented most immigrant workers, organized a national mobilization that included labor, business, political, religious, community, immigrant, civil rights and others, to demonstrate to Congress and the President that there was widespread support for immigration reform. They called on the government to recognize “the contribution of immigrant workers to the quality of social, cultural, political and economic life in the United States.” For the past 20 years, the AFL-CIO and many individual unions have been at the forefront of national and local campaigns for immigrants’ rights and social justice.
As the political landscape of the 21st century has changed, many groups have stepped up to support undocumented workers. Undocumented workers are covered by the NLRA and have the same workplace rights as documented workers performing the same jobs. However, the power dynamic between employers and undocumented workers creates an environment ripe for intimidation where workers are unlikely to raise concerns about safety and harassment because they fear being fired and deported. Labor unions are using arbitration and collective bargaining to try to improve the lives of undocumented and documented workers alike. Some unions try to bargain over immigrant-protective clauses in contracts that would limit the employer’s ability to take action against employees for their documentation status. Many unions work closely with worker centers and immigrant rights coalitions to fight for protections and economic justice for all.

**Labor and Gender Equity**

Women have always fought for equal recognition for their work which has been historically undervalued throughout history and into the current day. Women have always been expected to care for others without compensation. As the Industrial Revolution expanded in the mid-19th century, factories began recruiting women workers. In Lowell, Massachusetts, textile mills recruited young women, who made up about three-quarters of workers. The “Mill Girls” were paid half the wages of their male counterparts, but for the first time they were able to earn income to help support their families. In the 1830s and 1840s their wages were cut, conditions became more dangerous, and women faced misogyny in the workplace. In 1834 and in 1836, the Mill Girls fought the cut in their wages by striking and protesting to restore their pay to prior levels. Despite their incredible efforts, management had many more resources and refused to agree to most of the Mill Girls’ demands. By the 1840s, the Mill Girls pursued broader political actions to improve their working conditions. Women could not vote, but they fought for legislation including a 10-hour workday, and they fought to organize other textile workers in New England.
The Lowell Mill Girls were the first of many groups of women to take strong leadership roles in the labor movement. In 1900, women in New York organized the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), which unionized hundreds of thousands of garment workers over a century. Beginning in New York City, with mostly Italian and Jewish immigrant workers, the union made important gains. In 1909, “the Uprising of the 20,000” was a massive strike led by Clara Lemlich and the ILGWU. The strike exposed the oppressive and exploitative workplace conditions faced by immigrant workers in the garment industry. Two years later, a fire broke out that killed 146 women who were locked into the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, further exposing the dangerous working conditions for immigrant women and raising awareness among the American public about the importance of unions.

As women began to organize at work, they faced blatant gender discrimination. Women were paid less, fired when they became pregnant or had children, and kept out of the highest paying occupations. In some cases, unions accepted the existence of pay gaps, as men saw women’s equality as a threat to their hard-won benefits. But eventually, labor leaders embraced gender equality as an issue that could be solved by fighting for equal pay for equal work. The labor movement was the key group fighting for the Equal Pay Act. Congress finally passed the law in 1963, for the first time stating that wage discrepancies between men and women were illegal. This was seen as a huge win for gender equity and was achieved after a long fight by labor unions together with feminist organizations.

While some women were organizing and fighting to be paid equally with the men who worked beside them, women who worked in all-female occupations also suffered from discrimination.
Domestic workers, including nannies and house cleaners, had been excluded from formal labor protections including the right to a minimum wage. They were also primarily Black and/or immigrant women who worked in white households. Several organizations of domestic workers organized to push for higher pay, labor protections, and dignity for domestic workers. They were ultimately successful in gaining federal minimum wage for household workers in 1974. They continue to organize at the state level. Massachusetts passed a Domestic Workers Bill of Rights in 2015, guaranteeing domestic workers the right to minimum wage, overtime pay, all wage and hours laws, and special protections including rest time and rules for live-in workers.

Today, women still earn less than men, and many women face other forms of discrimination including sexual harassment.

Women of color also make less than white women, and trans women earn less than cisgender women. Black trans women are arguably the most economically vulnerable members of our society, earning much lower wages than white workers and cisgender workers, and are often forced to rely on alternative economies and community currencies to survive. For all of us to thrive economically, we need to address these issues of drastic wealth inequality and focus on the most affected members of our society. This is an issue that is addressed in the labor movement through coalitions with community organizations, the push for public policy and laws that limit employment and wage discrimination, and contract language that equalizes the playing field.

![Women earn less than men at every education level](chart)

**Women earn less than men at every education level**
Average hourly wages, by gender and education, 2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than high school</td>
<td>$13.93</td>
<td>$10.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
<td>$18.61</td>
<td>$14.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>$20.95</td>
<td>$16.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>$35.23</td>
<td>$26.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced degree</td>
<td>$45.84</td>
<td>$33.65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: EPI analysis of Current Population Survey Outgoing Rotation Group microdata*
However, the wage gap is much smaller for union workers -- and unions continue to lead the fight for pay equity on behalf of all workers. Labor organizations improve women’s working conditions through contract language and direct action. Unions benefit all women workers by passing legislation and serving as a strong voice in the struggle for minimum wage increases, parental leave, family and medical leave, and much more.

**Labor and LGBTQ Rights**

Throughout the labor history of the United States, there have undoubtedly been LGBTQ workers fighting for labor rights. However, their struggles were largely invisible to historians, and only in the late 1900s labor and the fight for LGBTQ rights become explicitly linked.

On June 28, 1969 the New York City police raided the Stonewall Inn, a popular gay and lesbian club in Greenwich Village, and LGBTQ people decided to fight back in a series of demonstrations known as the Stonewall riots. These riots were a turning point in the LGBT rights movement, and it forced LGBT rights into the spotlight in the US and around the world. Out of this rebellion came the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR), an organization of transgender and queer people founded by Sylvia Rivera and Martha P Johnson. STAR served many needs of the LGBTQ community but was primarily an LGBTQ youth shelter and the first transgender sex worker labor organization. STAR functioned similarly to other labor organizations by making sure workers were not exploited and teaching them how to negotiate their wages.

Following the Stonewall riots, LGBTQ rights were at the forefront of the American political consciousness and unions began working more directly with LGBTQ organizations to improve
the working conditions of LGBTQ workers. In 1970, the American Federation of Teachers passed a resolution that “the American Federation of Teachers protest any personnel actions taken against any teacher solely because he or she practices homosexual behavior in private life.” The National Education Association, the largest labor union in the US, stood by this decision and included sexual orientation in their nondiscrimination policy in 1973.

In 1974, the Teamsters approached Harvey Milk and Howard Wallace, two openly gay politicians and activists in San Francisco, to support a boycott against Coors. Coors was an anti-union beer company, which screened potential employees with a lie detector test asking their opinions on unions, as well as whether they were a “homosexual.” Milk and Wallace supported the boycott on the condition that the Teamsters advocate for hiring openly gay truck drivers. After Milk and Wallace endorsed the Coors boycott, they pressured about 100 bars in San Francisco to boycott as well and the sale of Coors beer plummeted. The combination of pressure from the LGBT community and from the Teamsters was successful and made this boycott one of the most visible and powerful at the time.

Throughout the coming two decades, LGBT workers began coming out, in their lives and in their unions, which led to new LGBT activism within the labor movement. All over the US, unions were adopting and fighting for more rights and against employment discrimination for LGBT members. It was still fairly common for people to be fired because they were queer. In 1983, the AFL-CIO passed a resolution in favor of gay rights and urged the federal government to include sexual orientation in employment discrimination. During the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, unions fought to protect employees with HIV/AIDS from discrimination. At the same time, many workers at HIV/AIDS clinics sought to unionize their workplaces. Forming a union would help workers care for AIDS patients by increasing staffing and giving them more say in the day-to-day functions of the clinics.

In the 1980s and 1990s, as more union workers began coming out in their workplaces, workers started forming LGBT caucuses in their unions to advocate for LGBT rights in their own union and in US politics. In 1997, Pride at Work was affiliated as a constituency group of the AFL-
CIO. Since its inception, Pride at Work has been fighting for LGBT workplace rights by mobilizing LGBT union members and forming chapters all over the country.

Today, unions fight for increased protections in the workplace for LGBT workers by negotiating progressive benefits that otherwise would not cover LGBT workers. These include better family and medical leave protections, expansive understandings of “family,” healthcare benefits that cover trans- and queer-specific medical procedures, and much more. Unions in Massachusetts, from building trades to teachers to service workers, proudly organized to help pass Question 3 in 2018, which prohibited discrimination in public accommodations on the basis of gender identity.

**Labor and the Living Wage**

Beginning in the late 1800s with the founding of the AFL, the labor movement has been a strong proponent of the “living wage.” The living wage movement fights for all workers, not only union workers, to be paid a wage that gives them a good quality of life. This movement continues today with the Fight for $15.

In the 1930s, the US was experiencing the Great Depression; most working people lived in horrendous conditions and the United States offered no unemployment insurance or social security benefits. As the economy improved slightly during the 1930s, unions increased their activity and recruited thousands of new members, joining the campaign to create a minimum wage to finally set a standard for how workers should be paid. The Communist Party formed “Unemployment Councils” that mobilized to fight against capitalism which had led to the Great Depression. They organized food drives for African Americans in Harlem who were most affected by the Great Depression, they protested police brutality, and they focused on solidarity between communities and trade unions.

Unemployment Councils, community organizations, and trade unions pressured President Roosevelt to implement legislation that would help unemployed people and workers. They eventually won with the implementation of the New Deal, a set of policies and programs including the Works Project Administration which provided jobs for unemployed Americans. In 1938, the Fair Labor Standards Act was passed which established a minimum wage of $0.25 per hour. Since then, the federal minimum wage has been raised 28 times due to the continued efforts of labor and community organizers. Over time, states (and some cities) have set their own minimum wage laws to ensure workers get a higher wage than the federal mandate. States that have higher minimum wages are also much more likely to have higher union density, which means more workers are in unions. Workers know that we can come together to fight for fair treatment and that when we come together, we win. In the U.S., the minimum wage is currently $7.25 per hour -- but in Massachusetts, thanks to a strong statewide labor movement, the minimum wage is $11 per hour and rising to $15 per hour over the next five years.

On November 29, 2012, employees in New York City from McDonald’s, Wendy’s, Burger King, Taco Bell, and KFC walked out on the job and staged protests across the city demanding a wage
of $15 per hour and the right to form a union, which no fast food workers had. This action became the beginning of the “Fight for $15,” a global movement to raise the minimum wage to $15, and in some places higher than $15. The Fight for $15 has recently been successful in Massachusetts, where state minimum wage will go up to $15 per hour by 2023. New York, San Francisco, Seattle, and Los Angeles have also passed similar legislation to increase minimum wage to $15 per hour.

The fight for a living wage has been precipitated by the vast income inequality in the US. Current rates of inequality are close to income inequality during the era before the Great Depression. Jeff Bezos, the CEO of Amazon, is worth $145.1 billion, while Amazon employees sleep in their cars, and work in terrible conditions. Social media has made this inequality more visible, and many Americans have been working against the widening gap between rich and poor.

While Jeff Bezos is making billions of dollars, many Americans need to work more than forty hours per week and many need multiple jobs just to survive. This has led to a campaign, “One Job Should Be Enough.” This campaign was started by UNITE HERE, a union that includes employees of Marriott. As the largest hotel employer in the world, with annual revenue of $22.9 billion, employees say that one job at Marriott should be enough to provide them a good living. In October 2018, housekeepers and other workers at Marriott hotels in Boston joined Marriott workers across the country and went on strike, making history as the first ever hotel strike in
Massachusetts. They won considerable gains including wage increases, enough hours to make a living wage, protection from sexual harassment, paid parental leave, and more.

**Labor and Civil Rights**

In the early 1600s, after the founding of Jamestown, Virginia, the early US colonists began growing and harvesting tobacco. When they needed more laborers to pick tobacco, however, England did not provide anyone to help, and growers started relying on Native people as indentured servants. If indigenous people worked on the tobacco plantations for a period of time, they would get transported to Virginia and eventually be free. As the demand for labor grew, plantations owners started to buy African people through the slave trade and forced them to work, without wages and with no promise of freedom. Over the next 250 years, African-Americans were forced into slavery and they also resisted slavery through tactics such as the Underground Railroad, armed rebellions, escape plans, and slowing down their work. Slaves participated in the first “general strike” in the US where they abandoned plantations and rebelled against slave owners in 1739. Some slaves escaped, but most who rebelled were punished or murdered. Many slave rebellions followed, including Nat Turner’s Rebellion in 1831.

Eventually, after thousands died in the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln signed the emancipation proclamation (1863) outlawing slavery and indentured servitude.

While the Thirteenth amendment of the U.S. Constitution outlawed slavery, it left a loophole: slavery was allowed as a punishment for breaking the law. Prisoners are still put to work without minimum wages, and some argue that the mass incarceration system continues a legacy of forced labor, especially for black and brown people who make up a disproportionate majority of prisoners in the U.S.

In the early 20th century, more than 6 million African-Americans moved out of the South to other cities across the country in what is known as the “Great Migration.” This migration caused a huge demographic shift in major cities such as New York and Detroit, leading an increase in the number of African-Americans in the industrial workforce. Many African-Americans faced discrimination in the workplace, in hiring, and even by some unions. However, many unions saw the struggles of African-Americans as intertwined with their struggles and began to build solidarity. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), founded in 1909, provided a way for African-Americans to come together to discuss workplace discrimination. The NAACP built coalitions and solidarity with many major industrial unions such as the UAW, and is still a huge partner of labor unions today.
In the 1960s, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. became nationally recognized as a leader of the Civil Rights movement. At the same time, he was building a relationship with labor unions and saw the important link between labor unions and the civil rights movement, telling the AFL-CIO Executive Council that “we are confronted by powerful forces telling us to rely on the good will and understanding of those who profit by exploiting us. They resent our will to organize. They are shocked that active organizations, sit-ins, civil disobedience, and protests are becoming everyday tools just as strikes, demonstrations, and union organizations became yours to ensure that bargaining power genuinely existed on both sides of the table.” Dr. King emphasized that African Americans are “almost entirely a working people” which recognizes the importance of the labor movement to fight intersectional struggles. Dr. King frequently spoke out about the gender pay gap, recounting the history of wages for women that had only steadily increased in his lifetime. He was also a proponent for social welfare programs that would give everybody a “tolerable” life, including older people who have small pensions or no pensions at all. His focus was on creating a wage system that would not just let people live, but thrive, and the content of many of his speeches focused on this narrative. When he was murdered, Dr. King was in Memphis, Tennessee, marching with striking sanitation workers demanding respect and economic justice.
Labor Today: Unions are under attack, but we’re fighting back!

The labor movement has an incredibly powerful history of working people rising up together to fight for better working conditions, better lives and a better society. While employers and political leaders have attempted to undermine and attack the power of unions, workers have used their collective strength to fight back.

In the 1970s, corporations began to organize to counteract the power of the united labor movement. Working with right-wing political groups, think-tanks, and conservative foundations, the Chamber of Commerce and the Business Roundtable organized the wealthiest businesses and corporate executives. Together they used their significant resources to craft a unified agenda to protect capitalism and business interests. Their first goal was to destroy unions. Unions were central to the fight for social and economic justice -- and they also provided the resources and person-power for many Democratic political campaigns. The corporate attack against labor was quite successful in the private sector, and union density began to fall as employers were emboldened to fight back. Union-busting law firms and consultants helped employers destroy organizing campaigns and prevent worker mobilization.

As union density fell below ten percent of workers in the private sector, employers were able to eliminate pensions and benefits, and to turn good jobs into part-time positions without benefits -- and there were not enough unions to fight back. The right wing turned its attention to the public sector, where unions had continued to be strong and organized almost a third of all workers. By pushing for right-to-work laws, the corporate lobbyists weakened unions for state workers. With the Janus v. AFSCME Supreme Court case, the right wing threatened to dismantle public sector...
unions across the US. So far, in most states, union members are resisting this attack by stepping up to organize and involve more workers, and union membership has only increased since *Janus*.

In the private sector, wages have not kept up with productivity and the cost of living, and companies pass on the costs of healthcare and dental benefits to employees. We have seen an increase in the “gig economy” of independent contractors, such as Uber or Lyft drivers, SAT test graders, and tech workers. Because companies do not classify these workers as employees, they are denied the rights of employees, including the right to form a union to collectively bargain their wages, hours, and working conditions. In many cases, these “gig” workers do not even make minimum wage for the work that they do. They also have no healthcare benefits, retirement funds, or ways to voice their concerns. While they can set their own hours, their pay changes depending on algorithms that increase prices when there is higher need. Workers have no idea whether they will receive work or adequate income to live. Drivers have incentives to compete against each other in a race to the bottom, until no worker is making any profit at all.

The labor movement is the largest group fighting for social change and economic justice. In 2018, almost 50,000 teachers went on *strike* in states around the country -- fighting for their students even more than themselves. They protested low wages and slashes to benefits, but also focused public attention on inadequate school funding, racial and economic disparities, and overcrowded classrooms. Despite many states’ laws that prohibit public sector workers from striking, teachers decided to pour into the streets in thousands, risking their jobs to fight for justice in their communities. And they won. In every case, the strikes resulted in better working conditions for teachers as well as better learning conditions for students -- and often higher wages and better funding for other public services as well.

Workers are also using their power to resist state violence such as the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) attack on immigrants and separation of immigrant families. When Amazon was discovered to be marketing facial recognition software to the US government, hundreds of Amazon technology workers signed a letter demanding Amazon stop contracting with law enforcement agencies. In addition, they urged Amazon to stop providing infrastructure for tech companies that create immigrant-tracking technologies for ICE.
As unions represent fewer workers and labor laws have become more anti-worker, worker centers have become a new tactic of the labor movement and worker organizing. Worker centers, which started to grow rapidly in the mid-1990s, are community groups that mostly organize workers that do not have the ability to form a union. For example, most US worker centers focus on organizing immigrants, domestic workers, and agricultural workers due to their vulnerability and legal exclusion from collective bargaining rights. While worker centers fight for worker rights, they are not unions and they do not have the right to be recognized and to bargain collective agreements. The Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) is a worker center in Immokalee, Florida that fights for better wages and workplace protections for tomato harvesters. Through years of protesting and organizing boycotts, the CIW has implemented a Fair Food Program. Food retailers and restaurants (primarily fast food restaurants) can buy tomatoes that are certified through the Fair Food Program which ensures higher wages for tomato harvesters and other workplace protections such as better channels for reporting sexual violence and worker education programs.

Looking Toward the Future

Throughout the history of the United States, workers always have struggled for justice. Their struggles have shaped the economic, social, and political landscape of the US, as they continue to do today. In the 21st century, workers and unions are building worker power and solidarity
between unions and other community organizations. Through new technologies including social media, apps, and networking technologies, workers are reaching out to coworkers and community members more effectively, and developing more widespread public campaigns.

Unions do not only represent factory workers and building trades, as they once did. All sectors of the economy are organizing unions. In April of 2018, for example, Harvard University graduate student workers voted “Yes” to form their union, and entered into negotiations with the University. Throughout their campaign, they used social media to spread their message. They created videos with workers and prominent politicians, including Senator Elizabeth Warren, voicing their support for the Harvard Graduate Student Union. Workers are finding creative ways to spread their message and fight for their rights.

While the Harvard Graduate Student Union’s victory is impressive, it represents only a small part of organizing at higher education institutions. The vast majority of higher education unions are at public universities and in Massachusetts, all public universities are unionized. Unions represent dining hall workers, maintenance workers, faculty, staff, graduate students, and even undergraduate students. The University of Massachusetts Amherst has the first union of undergraduate student workers in the world, the Resident Assistant and Peer Mentor Union. Many other Resident Assistants and undergraduate workers across the country have tried to form unions, and there is currently a union of resident assistants at McGill University in Montreal, Quebec. Student-worker unions can be a tremendous pathway to empowerment in institutions of higher education, and student activism can impact the lives of those struggling with massive student debt. It just takes one person, maybe someone who read a labor history study guide for a scholarship exam, to get their coworkers together and begin the process of forming long-lasting change in their workplace, community, and society.

Resident Assistants and Peer Mentors at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst (2015) / Source: Resident Assistant and Peer Mentor Union
As long as capitalism maintains economic and political control, the labor movement will always be under attack. But history has shown that we have tremendous power in our numbers and even when we feel small, our collective action can triumph. Throughout the course of history, we have always been stronger when we come together not just with our fellow workers, but with other vulnerable and oppressed members of our society. All of our struggles are linked, and through our convergence of struggles we can create a more just world.
Timeline of Massachusetts and United States Labor History Events

1646: Ten years after the settlement of the Massachusetts Bay colony, shoemakers requested the “liberty” to form an organization or guild. Guilds originated in the Middle Ages to set fair prices for their members’ products and regulate working conditions.

1734: Boston bakers engaged in the first recorded strike to demand fair prices for their bread.

1770: Shipyard apprentices protested against the British military occupation of Boston. Two of those apprentices and a runaway slave named Crispus Attucks were killed by British “redcoats” at the Boston Massacre. They lie together in Boston’s Old Granary burial ground.

1805: Philadelphia shoemakers (called cordwainers at the time) were the first of many associations to be indicted on charges of forming “a combination” [i.e., an employee association] and charged with “conspiracy to raise wages.” The U.S. judiciary ruled on the side of the employer.

1832: Ship carpenters in Massachusetts protested against working from dawn until dusk. They went on strike demanding a ten-hour day. Arguing that the Declaration of Independence guaranteed all men equal rights, the carpenters demanded reasonable working conditions. They were accused of forming a “horrible combination” and a “conspiracy” against their employers. The strikers were defeated by another kind of conspiracy, the one between their bosses and the wealthy merchants who invested in the shipyards.

1833: The New England Association of Farmers, Mechanics, and Other Working Men appointed a committee to investigate child labor, which had become common; teenagers and children as young as eight and nine years old were working on ships, in mills, and in other wage labor. Workers’ associations tried to end child labor by making education mandatory so that children were in school and not in the factories or fields.

1836: Young girls working in textile mills in Lowell, Massachusetts went on strike, also demanding a ten-hour day and better working conditions. Led by Sarah Bagley, they formed a Female Labor Reform Association, and the women led many strikes and protests.

1838: Escaped slave Frederick Douglass arrives in New Bedford. In Massachusetts, the birthplace of the abolitionist movement, some labor leaders allied with opponents of slavery. Still, free black workers confronted huge barriers to obtaining work in the Bay State, and Frederick Douglass had a hard time finding work on the docks. Despite widespread support for abolitionism in Massachusetts, free black laborers suffered from racial discrimination by white employers and workers alike.

1842: In Commonwealth vs. Hunt the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts was the first court to recognize workers’ right to organize unions. The judges ruled that workers could legally associate with each other and seek to persuade others to do so – and that collective action was not “criminal.”

1852: Massachusetts was the first state to make education mandatory for all children between the ages of eight and fourteen, with unions leading the way. Government, and business opposed the
establishment of public schools, describing them as “socialistic” and “destructive of individual initiative.” According to Horace Mann, who championed public education 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.”

1857: A depression made jobs scarce 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. Irish immigrants encountered hostility from native-born Americans who feared the Irish as competitors for jobs. 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.

1860: Massive shoemakers’ strike in Massachusetts. Lynn was “the nation’s shoe city” and workers there demanded fair wages from employers. When employers refused, the workers began the largest strike witnessed by that generation of Americans. 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. Eight hundred women strikers marched for several hours in falling snow through downtown Lynn, carrying banners that proclaimed: AMERICAN LADIES WILL NOT BE SLAVES: GIVE US A FAIR COMPENSATION AND WE WILL LABOUR CHEERFULLY. The shoe workers’ strike attracted national attention. Campaigning for President, 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.

1867: The National Labor Union (NLU) became the first national federation of unions, with William Sylvis as its first President. An expanding network of railways created regional markets, and workers had to organize on a larger scale. The NLU included women who were entering many trades and were forming unions. In the shoe industry, for example, the Daughters of St. Crispin represented the women stitchers, while the Knights of St. Crispin represented male workers. Sylvis and the NLU also supported the unionization of black workers who had started organizing their own unions – separate from white workers. During the depression of 1873, the NLU died.

1868: Workers formed “eight-hour leagues” during and after the Civil War from coast to coast, winning laws for an eight-hour day in eight states and persuading Congress to create such a law for federal employees in 1868. When the government failed to enforce these laws, the labor movement learned a lesson: legislative gains could only be preserved by militant well-organized unions.

1875: Textile mill workers in Fall River, Massachusetts went on strike after their wages were cut. But after eight weeks without wages, with their families starving, they were forced to accept wage cuts and sign “yellow dog contracts.” In these agreements, workers pledged never to join a union
again. Yellow-dog contracts remained legal until 1931, when Congress passed the Norris-La Guardia Act outlawing them.

1876: In Pennsylvania’s coal fields, a long strike turned bloody when employers called union leaders Communists and imported scab (non-union) labor and hired armed company police to protect them. The Pinkerton Detective Agency supplied employers with agents to spy on workers and report their plans. Pinkerton agents were armed and often used violence to break the union. Twenty Irish coal miners were executed by hanging for their role in the strike.

1877: Protesting a wage cut on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, strikers seized locomotives, stopped trains, surrounded round houses, and paralyzed the nation’s strongest corporations. General strikes erupted in Chicago and in St. Louis where unions took over the city for a few days. In Chicago, police killed twelve strikers. In St. Louis police, federal infantry, and militia regained control and jailed the strike leadership. In Pittsburgh, state militia shot twenty working class protestors to death.

1881: Samuel Gompers and other union leaders create a new national federation. At a meeting in Pittsburgh they formed the Federation of Organized Trades. Gompers’ cigar-makers union persuaded New York lawmakers to ban sweatshops. All major cities had central councils of trade unions or trade assemblies.

1882: New York City’s Central Labor Union staged the first Labor Day parade on September 5, to show the strength and unity of the labor movement and to warn politicians not to pander to greedy companies. 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.

1869: Workers formed a new national organization called the Knights of Labor. Originally, the Knights was a secret society; this was typical at the time in order to avoid company spies and retaliation by the employer. The Knights of Labor dreamed of “one great solidarity” and created an inclusive movement including skilled and unskilled workers, native and foreign-born, male and female. The Knights appealed strongly to Southern black workers who formed hundreds of “colored assemblies” of their own.

1885: The Knights of Labor launched a strike against Jay Gould’s Southern Pacific Railroad. The financier Gould boasted: “I can hire one half of the working class to kill the other half.” The workers won! Their stunning victory, with the support of farmers and townspeople, inspired other workers. Strikes erupted all over the U.S. in the 1880s—an average of about 500 per year.

1886: General strike called by both Federation of Organized Trades and Knights of Labor. “The Great Upheaval” included 1,432 work stoppages that rocked the nation’s workplaces. Terrence Powderly, the Knights’ leader, joined the Federation of Trades in calling for a general strike to force employers to accept the eight-hour workday. On May 1, 1886, 200,000 workers took to the streets shouting their demand: “Eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, eight hours for what we will!”
1886: Three days after the great general strike, on May 4, 1886, a bomb exploded during a labor rally in Chicago’s Haymarket Square, ultimately killing six police officers. Police opened fire on the crowd and killed workers. The socialist activists who led Chicago’s central labor union were arrested and tried for murder as a “red scare” swept the nation. The Knights of Labor were against strikes and violence, but they were blamed for the Haymarket tragedy and died out soon after.

1886: Trade union delegates formed a new national organization called the American Federation of Labor (AFL). The AFL’s first president was Samuel Gompers of the Cigarmakers Union. Unlike the Knights of Labor, which included unskilled workers and middle-class allies in their assemblies, the AFL was included only members of the skilled trades. Also unlike the Knights, the AFL excluded women and black workers. Gompers advocated “pure and simple unionism,” organizing for wages and working conditions for skilled white men. They represented carpenters, bricklayers, painters, iron workers, electricians, shoemakers, cigar-makers, bakers, musicians, and other tradesmen.

1887: The Massachusetts State Federation of Labor was created by the AFL. Frank Foster became its legislative director and editor of its union newspaper, The Labor Leader. That fall the state federation won a reduction in the workday of state employees to nine hours, as well as other reforms necessary to protect workers. They won 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.

1894: 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 the federal courts issued an injunction, federal cavalry troops broke the strike in Chicago, and Debs was sent to federal prison. This devastating defeat convinced Gompers and the AFL that massive sympathy strikes were too risky.

1900: Union membership reached one million workers. President William McKinley appointed an Industrial Commission, which concluded that “for the average worker,” labor unions created “a sense of greater liberty.” Unions allowed workers to band together and gain freedom because they no longer had to accept whatever the employer offered. Furthermore, the federal commissioners declared, only unions could “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 negotiate contracts with employers.

1901: Samuel Gompers, President of the A.F.L., distrusted the legislative process and advocated for workplace agreements between union workers and employers. He was against minimum wages and other laws that would make it more difficult for unions to negotiate good contracts. 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.”
1901: Union leaders who disagreed with Gompers wanted their own workers’ political party. They wanted the government to own and operate factories and railroads on behalf of the people, and they wanted the people who did the work to make the decisions as a cooperative. These workers joined the Socialist Party of America, led by the union leader Eugene Debs. Debs ran for President five times as a Socialist. Shoeworkers in Haverhill and Brockton, the strongest union cities in Massachusetts, elected socialist mayors between 1898 and 1902.

1902: The courts repeatedly ruled against unions. The AFL-affiliated Hatters Union called for a national boycott against a non-union company making hats in Danbury, Connecticut. The hat manufacturer sued the union, arguing that the boycott was a “conspiracy” in restraint of trade. The case made its way to the U.S. Supreme Court, which ruled against the union in 1908. The Court said the Hatters Union had engaged in an illegal boycott.

1903: Mary Kenney founded the Women’s Trade Union League (WTUL) at Boston’s Faneuil Hall. Kenney organized women in manufacturing; as a leader of the Bookbinders Union she was the first woman appointed by Gompers as a national A.F.L. organizer. WTUL fought for women’s rights to a living wage and safe working conditions.

1905: Under Gompers, the AFL institutionalized racial and gender segregation by chartering special “chapters” for blacks and women that allowed them a chance to organize but not as full-fledged members of the AFL. Some AFL unions, however, believed strongly in organizing everyone regardless of race or gender. The United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), for example, was founded in 1890 on a constitution that prohibited discrimination based on race, creed or nationality. The Brewers Union, led by Socialists, was another AFL union that included everyone. The UMWA organized everyone who worked in and around coal mines, recruiting more than 20,000 African-American miners by 1902.

1905: The radical Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) formed as a rival to the AFL. The IWW, whose members were known as “Wobblies,” supported mass strikes, especially of unskilled immigrant workers in the steel and textile industries. The IWW dreamed of forming “One Big Union” across divisions of race, gender and ethnicity—even across national origins. They believed in organizing workers that the craft unions thought “unorganizable”—including migratory field hands, lumberjacks, and domestic servants. Preaching and practicing solidarity, IWW militants defied segregation laws to support black and white timber workers in Louisiana, and they joined African-Americans with Irish, Polish and Lithuanian dockworkers in Philadelphia. A radical social movement as well as a trade union, the IWW created a culture of organizing filled with songs and creative tactics.

1909: The New York shirtwaist strike, also known as the “Uprising of the 20,000.” Women shirtwaist dress makers in New City’s garment district led the strike that built the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU). A majority of the women were Jews and other Eastern European immigrants; together they waged the first major strike in the sewing 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 (ACWA).
1911: With lobbying by the Massachusetts AFL-CIO, state legislators allied with labor and finally reduced the work week of textile workers to fifty-four hours (nine hours a day for six days a week). That year, Massachusetts lawmakers also approved a system of workmen’s compensation, to guarantee income to workers injured on the job.

1912: Young immigrant women in Lawrence, Massachusetts went out on strike after employers cut wages. This was the famous “Bread and Roses” strike, demanding living wages (bread) but also a better quality of life (roses).

1912: Union votes helped elect a Democrat, Woodrow Wilson, to the presidency. Under Wilson the AFL won progressive legislation including the creation of the federal Department of Labor. Railroad workers won the eight-hour day, seamen were protected from abuse, and some human rights were extended to workers – directly from the efforts of labor unions.

1914: Congress passed the Clayton Act of 1914. The law freed unions from prosecution under anti-trust laws and reduced 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. Congress and the President said, “the labor of a human being is not a commodity or an article of commerce.” Workers were not, in short, employers’ property.

1917: The U.S. entered World War I. The IWW had organized especially in the west among lumber, mining, and other industries, but employers brutally oppressed union organizers. The IWW and the Socialist Party had opposed US entry into the war in Europe. With increasing nationalism, the Espionage Act, and fears of communism, these groups were all but destroyed – the federal government prosecuted their leaders, and state governments outlawed all radical organizations. Eugene V. Debs, President of the Brotherhood of Railway Workers and a pacifist, was imprisoned for ten years for his beliefs. On the other hand, Gompers and AFL leaders supported the war effort and received federal protection in return for making a pledge not to strike during the war.

1919: The virulently anti-union National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) exploited U.S. patriotism and fears of communism to discredit trade unions. NAM argued that the labor movement was an “Un-American, illegal and infamous conspiracy.” The government supported NAM and allowed them to break strikes and blacklist unions, deport and even execute suspected “radicals.” President Woodrow Wilson ordered striking coal miners back to work after a strike, and did nothing to protect the steel workers from suffering a disastrous defeat in their mammoth national strike.

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 government officials.

1929: At the end of the “roaring twenties,” when business was booming for Henry Ford and other large industrial corporations, the Great Depression hit. Unions were already under attack, and the AFL barely survived the horrifying unemployment of the early 1930’s and the assaults by employers determined to cut costs and speed up production.
1932: Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt became President, soundly defeating Herbert Hoover whose pro-business policies destroyed the economy. Roosevelt’s New Deal programs helped unions.

1933: The National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) legitimated workers’ right to organize and encouraged millions of workers to join unions. Industrial union leaders rebuilt their organizations. John L. Lewis of the Mine Workers, along with Sidney Hillman of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers and David Dubinsky of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union grew dramatically, as men and women in coal camps and clothing factories organized themselves into new locals. Workers took up the cry, “The President wants you to join the union.” Teachers and musicians, waiters and waitresses, cooks and bartenders, newspaper reporters and movie actors joined new locals and guilds.

1933: In Massachusetts, a record 157 labor disputes rocked the state. Five thousand leather workers walked out in Lynn, Peabody, and other towns. The owners brought in scabs but local residents, especially ethnic organizations, supported the strikers. In Wareham, cranberry pickers went on strike in the bogs. Fifteen hundred field hands, mostly Cape Verdeans, struck for union recognition, higher wages, and an end to harsh rule by field bosses.

1934: A huge wave of strikes shut down factories all over the U.S. General strikes paralyzed Minneapolis, Toledo, and San Francisco, led by radicals and industrial unionists. Workers formed labor parties, joined left-wing parties, and even seized factories in sit-down strikes. John L. Lewis of the Miners called on the AFL to encourage workers in “mass industries” – not only skilled workers – to organize themselves into industrial unions. Congress began to fear that more strikes would hurt the economy, and many believed that workers needed higher wages to increase their buying power and revive the economy.

1935: Congress passed the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), drafted by Senator Robert Wagner of New York. The Wagner Act, or NLRA, protected the right to organize. It also created a National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to implement the Act. The Board was responsible for prosecuting employers for “unfair labor practices,” holding free elections among employees, defining union bargaining units, and promoting collective bargaining between labor and management. Many in the labor movement called the NLRA “labor’s Magna Carta.” Massachusetts saw a wave of strikes once going on strike was protected by law for the first time.

1936: John L. Lewis and others formed the Committee for Industrial Organizing (CIO) to try to force the AFL and its affiliates to allow industrial unionism. Sensing a threat, the AFL leadership expelled the ten unions of the CIO.

1936: Labor unions help to re-elect President Franklin D. Roosevelt, over opposition from big business, bankers, and most newspapers. The AFL and CIO registered millions of new voters, including immigrants and black workers. FDR followed through by creating social programs labor desired, including Social Security and unemployment compensation.

1936-7: 300,000 workers had joined the United Auto Workers, part of the CIO. Although the
Wagner Act mandated that employers recognize unions chosen by a majority of workers. General Motors refused to meet with the union. Auto workers seized a key Chevrolet engine plant in Flint, Michigan and refused to work until the world’s most powerful corporation agreed to sign a contract with their union. The great Flint sit-down strike set off dozens of plant occupations in 1937. Demonstrating their power to halt production, sit-downers demanded union recognition and 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.

1937: The CIO organized African American steel workers, Mexican American copper workers, and Asian plantation workers in Hawaii – and the labor movement was in the forefront of the civil rights movement against racism. Throughout much of its history and in spite of some leaders’ prejudices, the labor movement has been the single most integrated institution in the United States.

1937: The Supreme Court affirmed the constitutionality of the Wagner Act in the historic Jones & Laughlin decision. Unions could petition the NLRB to hold elections and charge employers with unfair labor practices. For the first time in history, federal law protected workers’ right to organize and anti-union employers could be prosecuted as outlaws.

1937: A. Philip Randolph finally won a contract for the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters with the Pullman Company, which had kept two generations of African-Americans in a state of servitude. This was the first organization of black men ever recognized by a large corporation. The Porters, who had earned $67 for a month of work in 1924, with a union earned $700 a month. 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 MBTA Back Bay Station. The memorial includes 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.”

1938: The Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) abolished child labor and established minimum wage and maximum hours laws. After 100 years of struggle, the labor movement finally won the eight-hour day.

1941: The CIO finally won elections at hostile large employers including Ford Motor Company. It unified a highly diverse workforce 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, CIO 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 – bringing disfranchised working-class people into the mainstream of the democratic process.

1941: Defense industries were booming as war began. 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.
1941: The US declared war on Germany, Japan, and Italy, and millions of union workers entered the armed forces. Women, asked to stay home during the Depression, were now asked to help with factory work, doing “men’s work” at union wages. Rosie the Riveter was the symbol of women taking pride in their contributions in the workplace, with the red bandana and motto, “We can do it.”

1941: The AFL and CIO became partners in the war effort. Labor leaders took a no-strike pledge and accepted a wage freeze in return for a guarantee that the new defense producers would hire union workers.

1947: After conservative Republicans took over Congress in 1946, employers lobbied for drastic restrictions on workers’ rights and union powers. The Taft-Hartley Act amended the original NLRA to deprive unions of important freedoms. Taft-Hartley banned the secondary boycott and sympathy strikes, and allowed federal injunctions in “national emergencies.” The Act outlawed the closed shop, which made union membership a condition of employment. In contrast, the Taft-Hartley Act gave employees “the right to work” in union shops without joining the union.* The Act also allowed union members to “decertify” (or terminate their affiliation with) their union. Taft-Hartley prohibited strikes during the term of a contract, and required all union officials to sign affidavits swearing they were not members of the Communist Party.

1949: The AFL and CIO became deeply involved in the Cold War at the international level. CIO President Phil Murray first resisted the wave of anti-Communism sweeping the nation, but then gave in to anti-Communist sentiment. Murray purged eleven affiliates accused of being “Communist-dominated.” The purge of the radicals who built the industrial unions was a turning point. The Red Scare deprived the labor movement of some of its best organizers, staunchest enemies of discrimination, and its strongest advocates of a social unionism dedicated to expanding democracy and equality.

1952: George Meany became president of the AFL. Rather than pursuing a new vision of equality for the working class, Meany declared a new era in which unions sought simply “a rising standard of living.” Meany came from the New York Plumbers Union and embraced “bread and butter” issues, harkening back to Samuel Gompers and the early AFL.

1955: AFL and CIO merge to form the AFL-CIO. The AFL majority had become more open to organizing efforts among unskilled workers and more tolerant of affiliates organizing along industry-wide rather than craft lines. The CIO majority had become less tolerant of left-wing influences among mass production workers during the depression of the 1930s. George Meany of the AFL and Walter Reuther, President of the CIO, found common cause and agreed to unite.

1955: Union members represented 35 percent of the workforce. Real wages increased by 30 percent during the 1950s as blue-collar union members equaled or surpassed white-collar earnings. Workers had paid vacations gained by collective bargaining. The number of wage earners among married women doubled. For a generation that endured the Great Depression, union contracts finally brought some hope of security through health insurance and pension benefits.
1959: During the 1950s, several unions faced government investigations of corruption. President Meany led the effort to expel corrupt unions including the Teamsters, the Federation’s largest. Congress passed the Landrum-Griffin Act of 1959 that prohibited improper activities by labor organizations, but also restricted union activities and limited workers’ voices in the workplace.

1960s: The AFL-CIO and the UAW supported Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta’s farm workers movement in California. Many years of organizing primarily Latinx farmworkers in California included a nationwide grape boycott that won gains for workers. The United Farm Workers (UFW) led a moral crusade that revived public support for unions as an instrument for social justice.

1963: Under President Lyndon B. Johnson, The AFL-CIO initiated, financed and organized effective campaigns for Medicare, federal funding for public education, the federal government’s War on Poverty, and the Equal Pay Act of 1963, which prohibits employers from discriminating based on sex. President Johnson said the labor movement did “more good for people than any other group in America” through its successful legislative agenda.

1964: Trade union leaders endorsed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits discrimination in employment, based on race, religion, national origin, and sex.

1968: In Memphis supporting a strike among Memphis sanitation workers, Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated. King had advocated for a “Negro-Labor alliance” for racial and economic justice.


1970: The fastest-growing unions in the U.S. were in the public sector. After 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. The AFL-CIO’s largest affiliates included the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), Service Employees International Union (SEIU), American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and others.

1971: Massachusetts teachers unions mobilized their members to win Chapter 622, which assured students access to all education programs, regardless of race, gender, religion, or national origin. Teachers 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 support for special-needs students.

1973: An international oil crisis and economic recession gave US corporations an excuse to turn unions. Employers demanded reductions in wages and benefits. When unions opposed concessions, employers provoked strikes or used the “lockout,” keeping workers out of their workplaces. Many plants closed and a half million manufacturing workers lost their jobs in the 1970’s.
1970s: Many unions lost members due to new “labor-saving” technology, and the flight of union shops to right-to-work states in the South. Other industries faced competition from imported goods. The powerful building trades concentrated on big public projects while non-union contractors took over residential construction. Manufacturing jobs disappeared as new jobs appeared in clerical, services, and sales. As a result, union membership fell from 30 percent in 1960 to 25 percent in 1980. Many factories moved to the non-union South where cheap labor was plentiful. This pursuit of low-wage workers fueled a spiral of de-industrialization and the shrinking of the manufacturing sector, as a few short decades later manufacturers would move again—to developing countries where desperately poor people worked for pennies under horrendous conditions.

1981: President Ronald Reagan fired 12,000 PATCO (Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization) members, striking air traffic controllers employed by the federal government. Reagan replaced them with scabs. The epithet of “scab” had been used to describe a strikebreaker but Republicans preferred the term “replacement workers.” Attacks on unions accelerated as employers provoked strikes, knowing that they could now get rid of union members with “permanent replacements.” Unions using a “business union” model had concentrated on the needs of their existing members rather than organizing new members, which had become much more difficult under the Republicans. Employers hired anti-union consultants to intimidate workers, fired many employees for union organizing, and violated labor laws with no consequences.

1990: Under these hard circumstances, local unions and their allies turned to the civil rights movement’s tradition of peaceful resistance, adopting tactics for community mobilization and civil disobedience. Within the AFL-CIO, many unions demanded a bolder agenda for social change.

1995: In the first contested election in its history, the AFL-CIO convention elected a new leadership team: John Sweeney as President; Linda Chavez-Thompson, the first woman and the first Latina to be elected to national office, as Executive Vice President; and Richard Trumka as Secretary-Treasurer. They reorganized old departments and created new ones staffed by younger activists. They added women and people of color to AFL-CIO leadership, and created an organizing department and supported the formation of “constituency groups,” caucuses of minority groups within unions. The Federation chartered memberships in groups representing the interests of Black, Latino, Asian Pacific and Gay, union members. They also took progressive positions in support of expanded workplace rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender workers.

1990s: Workers organized new unions especially in the service sector and areas of the economy where women, people of color, and immigrants work, including health care and hospitality, home care and child care, janitors and security guards, adjunct professors and graduate students.

2005: A group of unions left the AFL-CIO and joined the Change to Win Federation to push for more aggressive organizing and merge small unions into larger ones, including SEIU, the Teamsters, the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW), UNITE HERE, the United Farm Workers, and the Laborers’ Union. Since then, there have been other national realignments as some unions re-joined the AFL-CIO.
2009: Richard Trumka was elected President of the National AFL-CIO, representing 12.5 million workers across the U.S.

2018: The labor movement continues to pursue new strategies, organizing new members, and advocating for policies nationally and statewide on immigrant rights, health care, tax policy, education reform, and more. AFL-CIO leadership, nationally and in Massachusetts, continues to fight growing inequality and injustice. The labor movement pursues the solution by organizing working people into strong, diverse, and progressive unions. Recent victories include teachers’ strikes that won huge increases in education funding, the Marriott strike that won major gains for workers in several cities, and new groups of workers organizing unions and demanding equity and justice for the first time.
Glossary of Union Terms

**AFL-CIO:** The American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) was created in 1955 through the merger of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). The AFL-CIO is a voluntary federation of 55 labor unions; it fights for workers’ rights through activism and political advocacy. The AFL-CIO advances legislation and advocates for creating good jobs, investing in schools and transportation, minimum wage, strengthening Social Security and pensions, ensuring fair tax policies, and making high-quality, affordable health care available to all. The AFL-CIO fights for good jobs, and holds corporations accountable for their actions. As the federation says: “We help make safe, equitable workplaces and give working people a collective voice to address workplace injustices without the fear of retaliation. We fight for social and economic justice and strive to vanquish oppression in all its forms.”

**Arbitration:** Most grievance procedures end with the option of arbitration. This is a formal process whereby a third party (the arbitrator) settles a dispute between an employer and the union by holding a hearing and issuing a final decision if the parties can’t agree on their own. It is similar to a court case, where both employer and employee present their evidence, and the arbitrator acts as the judge. If a labor-management dispute cannot be resolved through the grievance process, the last step is arbitration.

**Bargaining Agent/Exclusive Bargaining Representative:** This refers to the organization that will represent a specific group of workers in bargaining a contract. Instead of individuals bargaining their own contracts, there is one organization representing all workers in a particular bargaining unit. “The union,” as it is usually referred to, is the only group with whom an employer is allowed to and required to negotiate wages, hours and working conditions.

**Bargaining Unit:** The group of workers that is represented by a particular union is called the bargaining unit. Some workplaces might have one bargaining unit -- for example, all workers in an automobile factory may be in one unit. Other workplaces have several bargaining units -- for example, in a school the teachers might be in one bargaining unit, while the bus drivers are in another unit, and the custodial staff and paraprofessionals are in yet other units. Each bargaining unit negotiates a contract that covers its members and relates to their specific jobs.

**Boycott:** organized effort to stop patronizing a company or a particular product, in order to pressure a company or an industry to recognize a union or to change its practices. For example, beginning in the late 1960s, the United Farm Workers union employed a series of boycotts in an attempt to gain recognition for grape and lettuce fieldworkers. Recently, Driscoll’s berry distributor became the target of a boycott due to its record of unfair labor practices.

**Collective Bargaining:** The negotiation process between an employer and the union is called collective bargaining, because the union negotiates for all workers in its bargaining unit. During
collective bargaining (also known as contract negotiations), representatives for the employer/management and the employees/union sit down to talk about what should be included in their next Collective Bargaining Agreement (also called the contract). Both parties will make proposals related to wages, hours, working conditions, benefits, and much more. These might include: raises, vacation time, schedule and hours, parental leave, health care, travel rules, preparation time, and health and safety. At the end of the bargaining process, they will have a new contract to govern the workplace for a specified number of years.

**Grievance:** This is a formal complaint process that is used when an employer violates or misinterprets the collective bargaining agreement. The grievance procedure makes the workplace more democratic because it provides a format for an employee to say something wasn’t fair at work and then to engage with the employer on the dispute until a solution is reached. Meanwhile the employee can’t be fired for raising the concern as might happen in a non-union workplace. If a solution can’t be agreed upon between the employer and employee raising the concern then the grievance process allows for several steps to work toward resolution, ending with a decision by a neutral party that hears the evidence from both sides and makes an impartial decision.

**Just Cause:** Just cause is the highest form of job protection that most unionized employees have in their contracts. It states that an employer cannot fire or discipline an employee without a good reason. If a union contract guarantees just cause, in order to discipline or fire an employee the employer must show that the worker has not done their job or has acted inappropriately, after having had a chance to improve their performance. Without just cause -- in non-union workplaces in Massachusetts -- there is “employment at will” which means that a boss can fire a worker for any reason at all (as long as it’s not discrimination based on race, sex, gender, sexual orientation, or age). Without just cause, an employer is free to fire an employee using arbitrary or unfair criteria -- for example, without just cause a worker can be fired if the boss doesn’t like the person, or if they would rather hire a friend into the position. Without just cause, the employer does not have to provide a reason or give any notice to the worker.

**Lockout:** a lockout is similar to a strike, however, it is initiated by management and is also usually prohibited in a collective bargaining agreement. When there is a labor dispute, sometimes management will refuse to let employees come to work. The word “lockout” derives from when employees would physically be locked out of factories. When management engages in a lockout, they often hire temporary workers to replace the workers that are locked out. Those who accept this type of work, or who otherwise do business with a company engaged in a strike or lockout, or who physically cross a picket line of workers are called “scabs.”

**Mandatory Subject of Bargaining:** During collective bargaining, there are certain subjects that employers and employees are required to negotiate. Mandatory subjects of bargaining are items that directly impact wages, hours, or working conditions. Being in a union means that an employer has to negotiate with you over these subjects. If the union makes a proposal that would increase your wages, give you more job security, or improve your workload, the employer must discuss the proposal in “good faith.”
**National Labor Relations Board (NLRB):** a government agency in charge of enforcing U.S. labor law for private companies. Members of the board are appointed to five-year terms by the U.S. President.

**National Labor Relations Act (NLRA):** also known as the Wagner Act, an act passed in 1935 that protects the rights of employees and gives them explicit rights to form unions. When it was passed in the 1930s it was the first time, the NLRA guaranteed that workers’ representatives must have the same rights as employers, including the right to sit across the table as their equals.

**Picket line:** a group of workers on strike, asking people not to enter the building or engage with the employer. Workers hold signs and create visible presence to raise awareness of the issues, and to ask people to support the union and not to work with the company until the strike is settled.

**Salt:** someone who works for a company or employer with the intention of organizing the workers into a union. “Salting” is one tactic that unions may use to connect with workers and talk with them about the benefits of forming a union. The salt is a regular employee of the company.

**Strike:** the withholding of labor by workers. This is one of the most powerful forms of collective power used to directly pressure employers. Before the creation of the National Labor Relations Act, strikes were frequent and very effective because they shut down entire companies and industries. Today, most union contracts promise no strikes for the duration of the agreement, and provide ways to settle disputes through grievance and arbitration procedures. However, sometimes workplace problems can become so extreme that workers decide it is in their best interest to break this clause and go on strike anyway. This past summer, for example, teachers in many states engaged in a wildcat strike. Wildcat strikes are technically illegal, and are not supported by the union leadership. When enough workers go out on strike, however, they have the power to compel the employer to meet their demands.

**Social Justice Unionism:** unions that focus on defending the rights of the larger community and forming coalitions with community groups and other social movements.

**Union Density:** union density is a percentage of workers who are members of unions in a city, in an industry, or in larger geographic areas.
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