

FAIR WORK: LABOR UNIONS AND YOUR ANCESTOR

Labor and work have been in question since the first colonies were established on our eastern shores. Developing a greater understanding for how labor unions effected American history - and your ancestor - can lead to highly valuable genealogical material.

It is nearly impossible to tell the history of the United States of America and leave out the significance and impact that labor, labor disputes, and organized labor have had over the past three-hundred years. Over that time, there has been an incredible mountain of documentary evidence created, and the research opportunities are quite fantastic.

As with any research conducted around organizations such as these, it is important to remember that their purpose and intent is far-removed from ours. When seeking records of your family, and their involvement in unions, always use discretion and have an abundance of patience.

Best Practices:

1. Research the organization over the individual. It is more likely that a local newspaper would report the events and activities of the larger organization versus reporting each individual involved. As you learn more about the specific organization, the opportunities for research on your specific ancestor will follow.
2. Always consider the history of the organization in the larger history of the county, state, country. Put the facts side-by-side on a historical timeline for comparison and easy review.
3. When looking for a defunct organization, pursue manuscript collections at local archives, universities and private libraries. Always seek out local museums and historical societies for additional insight.
4. Very little material is available online, but do as much as you can from home before making any repository visits in person.

Timeline of Major Labor-Related Events in American History*

Good to Know

The impact of changing laws is a crucial component to any study of labor unions. Each change in law of course effected how unions were allowed to organize, but also impacted how employers reacted and how judges ruled in individual court cases. Refer to the U.S. Department of Labor Historical Timeline

Jen Baldwin

ancestralbreezes@gmail.com

@ancestryjourney

**“Without labor
nothing prospers.”**

~ Sophocles

(https://www.dol.gov/100/timeline/?utm_medium=email&utm_source=govdelivery) for more information and a full description of each change in federal law. (Note that this timeline is available in several formats and can be downloaded for use as well.)

The below information should be used in conjunction with changes and adaptations to law, in order to fully understand the impact of the labor movement in American history.

1619	The first labor strike on American soil was organized and staged by Polish workers and artisans in Jamestown.
1677	First recorded prosecution against strikers in New York City.
1765	Artisans and laborers in Sons of Liberty protest oppressive British taxes.
1770	British troops kill five dock workers in Boston Massacre.
1773	Laborers protest royal taxation in the Boston Tea Party.
1786	Philadelphia printers conduct for successful strike for increased wages.
1791	First strike in building trades by Philadelphia carpenters for a 10-hour work day Bill of Rights adopted.
1843	Lowell Female Labor Reform Association begins petitioning for a 10-hour work day.
1860	Great shoemaker's strike in New England.
1869	Knights of Labor founded in Philadelphia – originally a secret society, they organize around the country under the radar of management. Several African American delegates were invited to, and attended, the National Labor Union annual meeting for the first time, with the intent of solidarity. However, African Americans were denied entry into existing white unions, and the Colored National Labor Union was formed this same year.
1877	A strike against the Baltimore & Ohio railroad sets off a wave of strikes across the northeast. Federal forces are called out for the first time in a labor dispute due to the violence and disturbances involved.
1886	A labor rally at the Haymarket Square in Chicago supporting the 8-hour work day erupts when an unknown party tosses a bomb at police – who then fire back. The incident stains the image of the labor movement and creates turmoil internally.
1887	The American Federation of Labor (AFL) is founded as a collection of trade unions. The organization continues to be a leader in the labor movement today.
1892	Homestead Steel Works endures a lockout which turns violent as 300 Pinkerton detectives are hired by the company and arrive at the mills by barge. Seven Pinkertons and eleven union members are killed in the ensuing battle. Court injunctions help to minimize the union, essentially safeguarding the steel industry from organized labor for decades after.
1894	A boycott of Pullman sleeping cars leads to general strike on the railroads.
1905	Western miners form the Industrial Workers of the World at a convention in Chicago, and it becomes one of the most radical of all organized labor groups.

1903	Women's Trade Union League formed at the AFL convention.
1909	"Uprising of the 20,000" female shirtwaist makers in New York strike against sweatshop conditions. The strike is organized by the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union – the largest labor action by women in the history of the United States.
1911	Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire kills nearly 150 workers in New York.
1913	Federal Department of Labor is established by President Taft. The incoming Woodrow Wilson appoints a United Mine Workers official as the first Secretary of Labor after taking office.
1914	Striking miners in Ludlow, Colorado face National Guardsmen in their camp housing. Eventually, they face machine guns, and their tents are set on fire. More than 75 people will be killed over the course of the dispute.
1919	After WWI, a wave of strikes breaks out with more than 40,000 coal workers and 120,000 textile workers walking off the job. The labor unrest is answered by a "Red Scare" – agitators are rounded up and the public turns suspicious of labor radicals.
1925	The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters is created by A. Philip Randolph.
1933	Frances Perkins becomes the first woman appointed to the U.S. Cabinet as the U.S. Secretary of Labor
1937	The CIO splits from the AFL over disputes about methods of organizing large industries.
1941	A march on Washington to protest racial discrimination in defense jobs is threatened by A. Philip Randolph.
1963	March on Washington for jobs and justice.
1964	Civil Rights Act bans institutional forms of racial discrimination.
1965	César Chávez forms AFL-CIO United Farm Workers Organizing Committee .
1968	Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., is assassinated in Memphis, TN during a sanitation workers' strike.
1973	Labor Council for Latin American Advancement founded.
1974	Coalition of Labor Union Women founded.
1997	Pride At Work , a national coalition of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender workers and their supporters, becomes an AFL-CIO constituency group.

^{1 2} *This timeline is intended as a sampling only – there are many significant events that were omitted due to space constraints.

U.S. Federal Depository Library Program

We can probably all agree that the Federal Government is good at producing written material – and they always have been. Thousands of documents covering nearly every imaginable topic can be identified under the

¹ AFL-CIO. "Our Labor History Timeline." <https://aflcio.org/about/history>.

² Schmoop.com. "History of Labor Unions Timeline." <http://www.shmoop.com/history-labor-unions/timeline.html>

Federal Government Print offices. There are numerous repositories across the country that hold these materials – though every collection is different and unique, as it is crafted to reflect topics of local importance. Collections may be in closed stacks, so review the policies of your local facility before pursuing on-site.

Use the Federal Depository Library Directory (<https://catalog.gpo.gov/fdlpdir/FDLPdir.jsp>) to locate the facility closest to you or the materials of interest. Note that this system is geographically based, there is no easy way to identify a particular collection or set of materials by topic. It is safe, however, to estimate that if you are using a facility in an area in which a great deal of labor union activity took place, they will hold labor-related publications. When searching through the institution card catalog system, use subject headings that will allow you to refine your search and identify potential target publications, such as:

- Collective Labor Agreements United States
- Labor Unions History
- Labor Unions United States History
- Labor Unions United States Political Activity

Once you have a publication of interest, it is easier to identify additional, similar content by name, the agency that produced the material, and so forth. The initial process will be largely key word based, however. Seek out any finding aids provided by the institution on the collection, and talk to the librarians for additional insight.

Additional Resources:

1. American Labor Studies Center. <http://www.labor-studies.org/>
2. The Institute for Research and Labor and Employment Library. (Berkeley) <http://irle.berkeley.edu/library/>
3. The Holt Labor Library. <http://www.holtlaborlibrary.org/Links.html>
4. Labor History Links. <http://www.laborhistorylinks.org/>
5. U.S. Department of Labor Wirtz Library. <https://www.dol.gov/oasam/wirtzlaborlibrary/>
6. The George Meany Memorial AFL-CIO Archives at the University of Maryland. "Guide to Collections." <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B270iiodc9t9LVFkNU9IUF81UEE/view>
7. Wikipedia. "American Federation of Labor." Specifically, see the list of Affiliated unions and brotherhoods. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Federation_of_Labor
8. Wikipedia. "Defunct trade unions in the United States." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Defunct_trade_unions_in_the_United_States
9. Washington State Federation of Labor Records; University of Washington, Special Collections. A good example of available, localized archives. <http://archiveswest.orbiscascade.org/ark:/80444/xv95516/op=fstyle.aspx?t=k&q=WAUWashingtonStateFederationofLabor0301.xml>
10. Working Class Movement Library (UK). <http://www.wcml.org.uk/>