

THE RISE OF INDUSTRIAL UNIONISM IN THE UNITED STATES

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Most of the people in the early history of the United States earned their livelihood by farming. Most of the industry of that time consisted of small shops which were run by master craftsmen and their journeymen. The bargaining for wages, hours, and working conditions led to simple agreements between the master and the journeymen.

The period of 1792-1827 was a period of local production, local markets, and local craft unions. This period saw the first limited introduction of machinery which very slowly began to replace the skilled worker.

The period of 1827-1837 was a period of trade unionism, proposed reform legislation, and the establishment of local labor parties. This period saw the development of local federations of craft unions called city centrals. This period was a prosperous one which saw local markets expand to regional and limited national markets. There were several attempts to federalize craft unions nationally, but they were unsuccessful. The Panic of 1837 brought about a depression and wiped out most of the local unions.

The period of 1837-1852 was a period of the "Isms", which were characterized by the superimposition of the ideology of the intellectual upon the labor movement. Labor was disillusioned by the reform movements and returned to practical business unionism.

The period of 1852 until the end of the Civil War was a period of improved industrial technology, wider use of industrial machinery, improved transportation facilities, and mass immigration. This brought about national markets, mechanization of industry, the use of cheap labor, and the need for national unions. The Civil War accelerated the use of labor saving machinery.

The period of 1866-1890 saw further expansion of industry into national markets. Transportation facilities were increased, the large mass of immigration continued with its huge supply of cheap unskilled labor, and there was the increased mechanization of industry. This period saw the development of large corporations and trusts with their concentration of economic wealth and power. This period was a period of national unions to counteract this concentration of economic power. The National Labor Union existed from 1866-1872. The Knights of Labor became nationally significant in 1878, reached its peak in 1886, then rapidly declined after 1866 and ceased to exist after 1900. The Knights failed because they were largely reformist in nature, and their control was too centralized. In 1886 the American Federation of Labor was established as a federation of national craft unions. The A. F. of L. membership was limited to skilled craftsmen who believed in practical business unionism which concentrated on wages, hours, and working conditions, and not in reformist measures.

During the period of 1890 until the middle 1930's the A. F. of L. grew, prospered, and became the dominant union group in the United States. Its membership was limited to unions of skilled workers. Two significant pieces of labor legislation, the National Industrial Recovery Act passed in 1933 and the National Labor Relations Act passed in 1935 gave a great impetus to union growth because they legalized the establishment of unions and the use of collective bargaining. Many leaders in the A. F. of L., notably John L. Lewis, urged the A. F. of L. to grant charters to industrial unions because the increased mechanization of industry had created many jobs which could not be organized by the A. F. of L. under its craft structure. Lewis wanted unions consisting of skilled, semi-skilled, and un-skilled workers, known as industrial

unions. The A. F. of L. leadership refused to grant the industrial charters, so Lewis and other industrial union advocates in the A. F. of L. formed a committee within the A. F. of L. called the Committee for Industrial Organizations to promote industrial unionism. The C.I.O. pursued this aim during the period of 1935-1938 until they were expelled from the A. F. of L., and when they set up a federation of industrial unions called the Congress of Industrial Organizations in 1938.

Many attempts at unification of the two labor groups, the C.I.O. and the A. F. of L., were made during the period of 1938-1955. The two labor federations were finally united in 1955. Although the A. F. of L.-C.I.O. federation contains millions of organized workers, there is a need to organize many millions more workers who should enjoy the benefits of union membership.