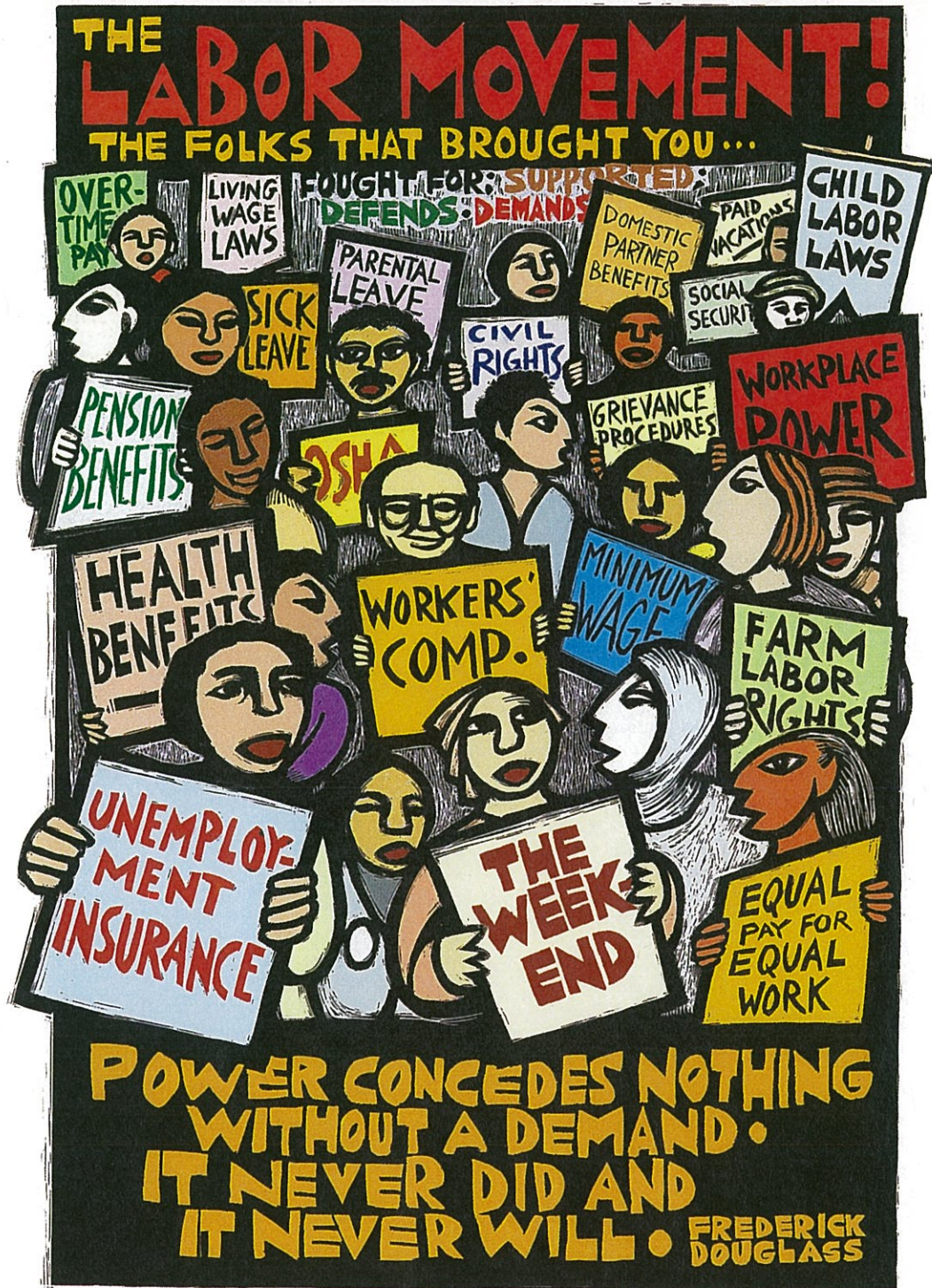


WHY ARE UNIONS IMPORTANT?



"Labor Movement" by Ricardo Levins Morales

**POLITICS AND ECONOMICS
OF ORGANIZED LABOR
IN THE 21ST CENTURY WORLD**

Unions are organizations of workers who join together so they will have greater influence in determining their wages, hours, and other working conditions.



I AM a Man. Sanitation workers' strike in Memphis, Tennessee, 1968. Copyrighted photo by Richard L. Copley

Labor unions first formed in the United States during the Industrial Revolution, a time in which workers had few protections from exploitation by employers and dangers in the workplace. Since then, unions have fought for, and won, many benefits that most Americans enjoy today. These benefits include an eight-hour work day, unemployment insurance, a minimum wage, family and medical leave, the prohibition of child labor,

and many others. Under U.S. law, workers also have a right to join a union. Despite this right, some employers use questionable—and even illegal—tactics to prevent workers from organizing to form unions.

HOW DO UNIONS REPRESENT WORKERS?

"HOW DO UNIONS NEGOTIATE WORKING CONDITIONS WITH EMPLOYERS?"

Union members negotiate a contract with their employer through collective bargaining, or the contract negotiation process, which determines wages, hours, and working conditions.

Typically, the contract is negotiated by two teams, one chosen by the workers and the other by the employer. Unions with active members that support the negotiating team are more likely to be successful in negotiating a contract that benefits workers.

"HOW CAN WORKERS DEMONSTRATE THEIR STRENGTH?"

Unions are only as strong as their members' involvement. Many workers expect "the union" to do all the work to improve working conditions, not recognizing that they, the members, are the union. Union members can demonstrate their solidarity, or unity in feeling or action, through collective action, or activities taken by a group to improve its well-being.

Collective action can include petitions, rallies, marches and other organized activities which demonstrate the workers' unity. Strikes, when large groups of workers refuse to work, are another example of collective action. Many labor strikes took place during the 19th and 20th centuries, but they are rarely used today and generally only when negotiations have failed.

Unions are best able to represent workers when the members are strong and unified.

"WHAT HAPPENS IF THE EMPLOYER DOES NOT COMPLY WITH THE CONTRACT?"

If the employer violates the agreement between the workers and the employer (the contract) the union can file a grievance, or official complaint. There are specific procedures to follow but this usually involves meeting with increasingly higher levels of management in an attempt to resolve the problem. If this is not successful, the problem can sometimes be resolved by an outside party, called an arbitrator.

Stewards are union members who have been trained to represent their co-workers. Stewards typically handle the first steps of the grievance procedure. Union representatives employed by the union also assist with grievances, sometimes taking on representation in the higher stages of the procedure.

"HOW CAN UNION MEMBERS HAVE A VOICE IN THE UNION'S DECISIONS?"

Union members elect representatives to the union's executive board, a team of leaders from the union's membership, which makes decisions about how the union is run.

Like any other organization, some unions are more democratic than others. In the past, women and people of color who wanted to assume leadership roles have had to struggle against some of the same discrimination within unions that existed in society at large. In recent decades, however, women and people of color have participated in much greater numbers in union leadership than in the past.

"WHERE DO UNION DUES GO?"

Union members pay dues to the union so it can:

- Meet its obligations to represent workers,
- Organize other workers, and
- Work for legislation and regulations that will benefit workers and their families.

"WHAT GAINS HAVE UNIONS ACHIEVED?"

Unions have played a key role in achieving the eight-hour day, minimum wage and overtime pay, health insurance benefits, and regulations that improve workplace health and safety conditions.

Unions have also worked for passage of legislation to prevent discrimination in the workplace due to race, gender, religion or disability.

Some federal examples include:

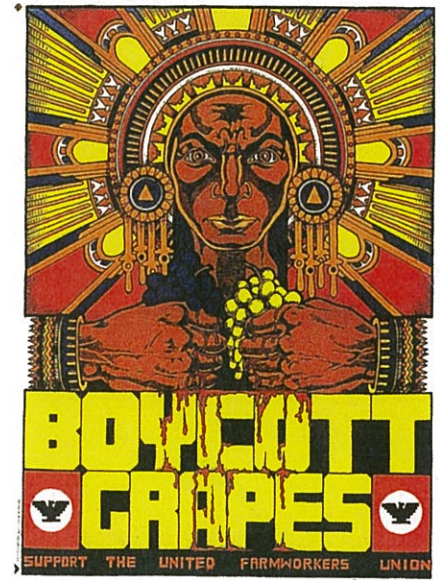
- The Social Security Act of 1935, which provides for a minimum old age pension for most working people, funded by employer and employee contributions.
- The Equal Pay Act of 1963 which makes it illegal for employers to compensate female workers less than male workers for the same job.
- The Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970, which requires employers to provide a safe and healthful workplace.
- The Americans with Disabilities Act (1990), which makes it illegal for employers to discriminate against someone with a disability.

Unions have also been influential in the struggle over the rights of marginalized groups in the United States. Over the course of American history, some unions have admitted minorities, like the Knights of Labor who accepted African American workers in the 1800s. Other unions excluded African Americans, women, and others for many years. However, many unions played a significant role in promoting the civil rights of racial and ethnic minorities, women, and others who experienced discrimination and economic inequality in American society. One example is the formation of the Japanese-Mexican Labor Alliance that advocated for Japanese and Mexican field workers just after the turn of the twentieth century.

A. Philip Randolph, the founder of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (the first African American labor union given a charter by the American Federation of Labor), pressured President Franklin Roosevelt to issue Executive Order 8802, also known as the Fair Employment Practices Act. The order banned racial



A. Philip Randolph of the BSCP in 1942. Photo by Gordon Parks (Office of War Information)



Grape Boycott by Xavier Viramontes

discrimination in hiring in war industries as World War II began. It was issued after Randolph told Roosevelt that he would gather thousands of African Americans to march on Washington, D.C. if defense industry discrimination did not end. Randolph and other labor leaders were also instrumental in organizing the celebrated March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in August 1963, where Martin Luther King, Jr. addressed a crowd estimated at 250,000 people—including many union members. In the 1960s and 1970s, César Chávez and Dolores Huerta along with Larry Itliong and Philip Vera Cruz helped organize farmworkers in California's Central Valley, leading high-profile boycotts and strikes that succeeded in gaining better working conditions for farmworkers.

ARE UNIONS STILL RELEVANT?



CFT Labor in the Schools Committee

Visit our web page:
[cft.org/about-cft/committees/
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Union membership has declined from 35% of the workforce in 1955 to present-day figures of about 12%, due to employer opposition, laws that make it easy for employers to fight unionization, and complacency of some union members.

Many experts note the parallel between union membership and the strength of the American middle class. Statistics demonstrate that when unions were at their strongest in the decades after World War II, American middle class living standards were at their strongest too. Since the 1970s, there has been a steady decline in union membership. Similarly, middle class pay has not increased significantly over that same forty year period.

Despite tough times for unions, they remain active in the continuing struggle to protect

the rights of workers and millions of other Americans. They have spearheaded union organizing and social justice work to maintain high living standards for workers in the US, despite the trend of corporate mergers, automation, downsizing, and outsourcing—flight to overseas markets by companies that want to maximize profits by lowering costs such as worker pay. Unions continue to be at the forefront of the fight for other causes, as well, like movements to strengthen the rights of women, people of color, and students. Campaigns for social and economic justice have also allied with unions to fight for an increased national minimum wage, and for improving low pay and working conditions at specific retailers like the nation's largest employer, Walmart.

More reading: *Work, Money and Power: Unions in the 21st Century*, a 24 page pamphlet available at: <http://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/work-money-and-power/>

To see why we need unions, just ask...

"WHO'S MAKING THE MONEY?"

In 1965 the average Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of a corporation made **20 times** as much money as the average worker. In 2013, the average CEO made almost **300 times** as much as the average worker.

In 1960, nearly **one third of the workforce** still belonged to unions. The top one percent of income earners took in less than 10% of national income, and the ninety-nine percent took home more than 90%. In 2014, just **one in twelve workers** belonged to a union. The top one percent of income earners took in more than 20% of national income, and the ninety-nine percent took home less than 80% of the income.

Sources: Economic Policy Institute, Institute for Policy Studies



Image by Rimi Templeton

Adapted from "Unions: Why Are They Important," prepared by Linda Delp, UCLA-LOSH Program