

Origins of Labor Reform in the United States

While many people associate the late 1800s and early 1900s with labor reform in the United States, its origins in North America date back to the mid-1700s. The first recorded strike occurred in 1768 when laborers in the New York colony sought to improve their wages. The first trade union organization in the United States, the Federal Society of Journeymen Cordwainers, was established in 1794 in Philadelphia. The society's goals were similar to its future successors: establish prices, protect wages, and secure a shorter workday.

The structure of American trade unions evolved throughout the early to mid-1800s. In 1827, the Mechanics Union of Trade Associations was founded in Philadelphia and unified craftsmen within the city. By 1852, just twenty-five years later, the International Typographical Union provided a structure that organized and unified local craft unions across the entire country and Canada.

Generally, such organizations were exclusive to skilled workers. However, two major unions of the mid-1800s—the National Labor Union and the Knights of Labor—began attracting unskilled laborers. At the same time, these organizations also lobbied for radical social reforms. The Knights of Labor specifically embroiled numerous craft unions in politics. Furthermore, the Knights of Labor suffered from poor leadership, a series of failed strikes, and state repression of labor activism after a bomb went off during a workers' demonstration in Haymarket Square on May 4, 1886. In December 1886, Samuel Gompers, a cigar maker by trade, along with the leaders of other craft unions, led a small-scale rebellion against the Knights of Labor and formed their own trade union, the American Federation of Labor (AFL).

Samuel Gompers and the AFL

Samuel Gompers, one of the founders of the AFL, was born in London in 1850 and immigrated to the United States when he was thirteen years old. Gompers, like many other children at the time, was forced to find employment and began making cigars like his father. Gompers's experiences working in a cigar factory helped shape his early views on unions and social change. Unlike leaders of the National Labor Union and the Knights of Labor, Gompers advocated for a more moderate approach to change. Instead of demanding radical reforms, Gompers promoted "voluntarism," or affecting change by putting the economic squeeze on companies through boycotts and strikes. Gompers's focus was on "bread and butter" issues: shorter workdays and workweeks, higher wages, and safer working conditions. This prevented Gompers and the AFL from alienating the American people and the government in the way that its predecessors had.

Gompers served as the AFL's president from 1886 until his death in 1924, with the exception of one year in 1895. Under his leadership, the AFL became immensely powerful, attracting upwards of half a million members by the year 1900. Between 1880 and 1900, workers led some twenty thousand strikes, more than half of which were considered successful in one way or another. The AFL, however, was not a union for every man (or woman). Instead, the AFL was almost exclusively for skilled laborers and represented the "aristocracy of labor." Its members were the most skilled, and as a result, already paid better than their unskilled counterparts. Though the AFL claimed to be open to all workers, in practice, the AFL was divided along racial and gender lines, as were most professions or trades at the time. At the same time, craft unions that belonged to the AFL failed to help organize unskilled workers, in many instances outright refusing to help them, though their demands for fair hours and wages and safe working conditions were often the same.