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Labor Unions and Politics in Modern Lebanon (1945–Present)

Workers march in Beirut with a banner reading "Workers of Lebanon, Unite!" during a labor demonstration (June 2020).

Introduction

Lebanon's labor movement has a complex history intertwined with the country's turbulent politics. Since the end of French Mandate rule in 1943, labor unions in major cities like **Beirut** and **Tripoli** have at times been powerful engines of social change, rallying workers across sectarian lines, and at other times been co-opted by sectarian power brokers and political parties. This article traces the modern history of Lebanese labor unions from 1945 to the present, examining how key political events – from independence and civil war to foreign interventions and economic crises – have influenced union activities and independence. It explores the evolving relationship between trade unions and political factions, notable strikes and protests and their consequences, shifts in labor laws and state policies on unionization, and the role of international labor organizations and foreign aid. The narrative is structured chronologically, highlighting distinct periods: the post-independence era (1940s–1950s), the pre-civil war years (1960s–1975), the **Lebanese Civil War** (1975–1990), the post-war reconstruction era (1990s), and the new challenges and movements of the 2000s and 2010s. A timeline of key events and tables of major unions and their political affiliations are provided for reference. The analysis draws on academic histories, archival records, and reports by labor organizations to present a comprehensive, academic-style overview of how labor unions and politics have intersected in modern Lebanese history.

Post-Independence Era (1945–1958): Unions in a New Republic

After Lebanon's independence (achieved in 1943 and finalized with French troop withdrawal in 1946), workers' organizations sought legal recognition and protections in the new republic. Their early efforts culminated in **Lebanon's first Labour Code**, promulgated on September 23, 1946, after unions organized a general strike to pressure the government [1] [2]. For the first time, the state formally recognized trade unions – a significant victory for Lebanese workers [2]. However, the 1946 Labour Code was a double-edged sword: Alongside guaranteeing basic labor rights, it imposed restrictions that made political organizing difficult and gave the government tight control over union registration [3]. In fact, the authorities dissolved existing independent unions soon after and re-authorized only those unions affiliated with the government line, effectively outlawing many leftist or unfavored unions [4]. One prominent federation that fell afoul of these rules was the left-leaning **Federation of Trade Unions of Workers and Employees (FTUWE)**, founded in 1944; it continued to operate underground for decades as an illegal opposition union body [4].

In the late 1940s and 1950s, Lebanese labor activism unfolded against the backdrop of the **Cold War** and Lebanon's sectarian power-sharing system. The government of President Bechara El-Khoury and his successors encouraged the formation of "official" unions loyal to the regime, partly to counter the influence of communist and Arab nationalist organizers. By the early 1950s, several government-approved labor federations had been licensed. The most important was the **Federation of the United Unions of Lebanon**, established in 1952 under the leadership of Gabriel Khouri [5] [6]. Khouri, a Maronite Christian influenced by Catholic social doctrine, was a staunch anti-communist but also a charismatic advocate for workers' rights [7]. Under his guidance, the United Unions federation grew rapidly and became a reliable intermediary between workers and the state [8]. Notably, U.S. officials saw Khouri's union as a bulwark against communist influence: In the mid-1950s, the United Unions received **American financial aid and international backing**, joining the U.S.-aligned International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) by 1956 [9]. This support helped Khouri's federation dominate organized labor. By 1956, of the four licensed labor federations in Lebanon, the United Unions umbrella included nearly all the major blue-collar and white-collar unions (while smaller craft and artisan unions populated the other federations) [9]. Meanwhile, leftist and pan-Arab unionists were largely pushed out of the legal union scene – their base confined to a nucleus of illegal unions (sometimes affiliated with the communist-led World Federation of Trade Unions) that had to operate clandestinely [10].

Despite their conservative orientation, the officially sanctioned unions did take up genuine worker grievances in the 1950s. For example, Khouri's own Union of Bank Employees won one of Lebanon's first collective bargaining agreements in 1955 after a successful strike – securing a 36-hour workweek, a paid 14th month bonus, and improved social benefits in the banking sector [11]. By 1958, amid rising inflation and inequality, the United Unions and other federations presented the government with a memorandum of comprehensive labor demands, including the creation of a social security system and public housing programs [12]. These proposals presaged major social reforms that would come in the following decade.

A milestone in this period was the formation of a national trade union center. On the eve of May 1, 1958, three major federations – the United Unions, the "League" of former FTUWE unions, and the Federation of Independent Unions – obtained government authorization to merge into the **General Confederation of Workers and Employees of Lebanon** (in Arabic, *Ittihad 'Aam li-'Ummal wa-Muzaffari Lubnan*), often referred to as the GCLW or **CGTL** [13]. The timing and intent of this unification were overtly political: By incorporating all licensed unions under one umbrella headed by Gabriel Khouri, the government and its Western allies

aimed to **neutralize the radical left** and portray the new confederation as the sole legitimate representative of Lebanese labor [14]. Indeed, the CGTL's creation was conceived "in an eminent anti-Leftist function," as historian Antoine Slaibi notes [13]. Khouri became the first president of the CGTL, cementing his role as the country's top labor leader on the eve of a national political crisis.

Tripoli, Lebanon's second city, also figured in these dynamics. In 1954 a separate **Federation of Unions of Workers and Employees of the North** was established under the patronage of Tripoli's powerful political boss (and future Prime Minister) **Rashid Karame** [15]. This northern federation mostly organized craft workers in and around Tripoli and reflected the influence of local zu'ama (traditional leaders) in the labor sphere [16]. Such regional and sectarian patronage would remain a recurring theme in Lebanese unionism. When the brief **Lebanese political crisis of 1958** erupted – a civil conflict pitting President Camille Chamoun's government against an opposition coalition of mainly Muslim, Nasserist, and leftist forces – organized labor's role was secondary but present. Socioeconomic grievances, especially among poorer Muslims in cities like Tripoli who felt marginalized by the ruling elite, fueled the unrest [17]. The CGTL was barely a month old when the **1958 civil strife** broke out in May, disrupting labor activity. Nevertheless, the groundwork had been laid for the CGTL to be the dominant labor organization in years to come [18].

The 1960s: Social Mobilization, Union Unification, and Rising Conflicts

The end of the 1958 crisis brought General **Fouad Chehab** to the presidency (1958–1964), inaugurating a period of state-led development and reform. Chehab sought to address some of the inequalities that had contributed to the unrest. Notably, in 1963 Lebanon established the **National Social Security Fund (NSSF)**, a social insurance system for workers [19]. While the NSSF marked progress – it provided pensions, end-of-service indemnities, and health coverage to formal sector workers – its implementation was halting and met with resistance from powerful business interests [20]. Throughout the 1960s, employers often **sabotaged the enforcement** of the Social Security Law: Many firms boycotted payment of NSSF contributions, carried out mass layoffs to avoid paying end-of-service benefits, or lobbied to delay and weaken social protections [20]. This intransigence set the stage for escalating labor struggles.

By the mid-1960s, Lebanon's economic boom (the so-called "Merchant Republic" model based on finance and services) was faltering. Income inequality and cost of living were worsening, and the benefits of growth were unevenly distributed [21] [22]. These pressures produced *"the broadest and most long-standing wave of labor conflict"* in Lebanon's post-independence history [23]. Workers across various sectors began agitating around common grievances – notably the demand to **adjust wages for inflation** (a cost-of-living allowance) and to **fully implement the NSSF** [24] [20]. Strikes, protests, and sit-ins proliferated in both industry and public services. Importantly, even previously apolitical or sectarian-divided workers started to unite around economic issues. Recognizing the need for a coordinated response, all nine existing licensed federations (including three leftist federations that had finally obtained legal recognition in 1966) formed a joint platform in 1967 called the **Supreme Council of Labor Unions** [25]. This informal council, which included pro-government, centrist, and leftist unions, aimed to craft a unified list of demands to confront the economic crisis [26]. The inclusion of left-wing union federations was itself a recent development: In 1966, under Labor Minister Jamil Lahoud (an ally of progressive Druze leader Kamal Jumblatt), the government had for the first time granted licenses to some formerly banned federations associated with the Communist Party and other leftist groups [27]. This move brought the Lebanese Communist Party's union base and other nationalist labor groups into the legal fold, ending two decades of their exclusion.

Amid this growing labor militancy, even the establishment union leaders saw merit in consolidating the movement. Gabriel Khouri – still head of the CGTL in the 1960s – proposed uniting **all federations into a single confederation** as a strategy both to strengthen labor's hand and to ensure his continued dominance in the face of rising leftist influence [28] [29]. Lengthy negotiations ensued, and on April 22, 1970, the **unification of the trade union movement** was achieved: All licensed federations, including the leftist ones, formally became part of the CGTL, making it a truly nationwide (if internally divided) confederation [29] [30]. This unification was a watershed. On one hand, it **enabled the CGTL to speak with a stronger collective voice** for Lebanese labor. The confederation now championed not only wage hikes and social security enforcement, but also issues previously sidelined as "radical" – such as the **right to housing, the inclusion of peasants in social security, and abolishing Article 50 of the Labor Code (which allowed arbitrary firings)** [30] [31]. These demands reflected the left's influence inside the CGTL and broadened the labor agenda beyond narrow workplace concerns.

On the other hand, the CGTL's internal governance still favored the old guard. The confederation operated on a "one union, one vote" rule, which meant the many small conservative craft unions could outvote the larger unions that represented tens of thousands of workers [32]. This **structural bias** ensured that right-wing, sectarian-aligned unionists retained control of the leadership despite the left's growing rank-and-file support [33]. As a result, the CGTL often stopped short of fully mobilizing its new base. Once a few modest economic gains were secured in the early 1970s (such as partial wage adjustments), the confederation's leadership grew reluctant to call further general strikes, leaving many deeper labor rights issues unresolved [32]. This created a **crisis of credibility**: the most marginalized and militant workers began to view the CGTL as ineffectual or even co-opted [34]. By the eve of the civil war, many labor struggles had moved **outside the official union framework**, with grassroots groups directly confronting both employers and the state [35] [36].

Indeed, the late 1960s and early 1970s saw a surge of labor and peasant organizing at the margins of (and sometimes against) the CGTL. In agricultural regions and poor urban quarters, new movements arose where formal unions had little reach. One major front was the **peasants' movement**. Starting in 1964–65, small farmers and sharecroppers began agitating against the monopolies and feudal practices in Lebanese agriculture [37] [38]. In Mount Lebanon, apple growers hit by a collapse in apple export prices organized protests against the cartel of middlemen that was driving farmgate prices below sustainable levels [39]. Leftist parties – the Lebanese Communist Party, Arab Nationalist groups, and Kamal Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) – threw their support behind the farmers, framing it as part of a broader social struggle [40]. In September 1965, a solidarity rally in the village of Btekhnay attracted *around 10,000 people*, an extraordinary show of force that thrust peasant issues into national politics [40]. This mobilization, as historians note, helped set the stage for Lebanon's growing left-right polarization in the late 1960s [41].

The ferment was nationwide. In the **North (Akkar region)**, discontent exploded among landless sharecroppers. By 1969–70, peasants in Akkar, long exploited by absentee landlords, launched an all-out rebellion. They protested *"semi-feudal"* labor conditions and waves of evictions as big landowners sold lands to agribusinesses [42]. Backed by the local branch of the Syrian Ba'ath Party, Akkar's tenant farmers and farm laborers even took up arms by late 1970, staging an insurrection against landlord authority [43]. In the **South**, thousands of tobacco farmers rose up against the state monopoly, the Régie (a government-licensed company controlling tobacco purchase and export) [44]. The tobacco planters – many of them Shi'a villagers with little political power – demanded higher crop prices, a fair distribution of cultivation licenses (which were often granted as political patronage), the right to unionize, and even full nationalization of the Régie [45]. Their movement threatened the clientelist networks of the southern political elites and

highlighted the intersection of class and sectarian inequities. Meanwhile, in the eastern **Beqaa Valley**, farmers protested against price-gouging by monopolistic produce traders and abusive practices of big landowners [46].

Urban industrial workers also struck outside the CGTL's control. Perhaps the most famous labor actions of this period were the **Ghandour factory strike of 1972** and the **tobacco Régie strike of 1973**. The Ghandour strike took place at a Beirut confectionery factory (Ghandour was a major sweets manufacturer) where workers protested low wages. The Régie strike involved tobacco processing workers and farmers. Both escalated into major confrontations. These two strikes *"constituted a turning point in the Lebanese labour movement"* – they put enormous pressure on the government and led to violent repression that resulted in multiple deaths [47]. In 1972, security forces intervened against the strikers (and supporting demonstrators) at the Ghandour factory, and in 1973 the army cracked down on the tobacco workers' protests. According to contemporary reports, at least two protesters were killed by army gunfire during the Régie strike of 1973 [48]. The use of lethal force against striking workers shocked many and further delegitimized the political order in the eyes of labor activists [47].

By the mid-1970s, Lebanon was in a deep social crisis. An array of leftist and pan-Arab parties had coalesced into the **Lebanese National Movement (LNM)**, which championed many of the socio-economic demands raised by unions, peasants, and students. They opposed the conservative sectarian establishment. Labor militancy and political radicalism fed into each other. **Tripoli**, for example, with its impoverished "poverty belts" and a tradition of Arab nationalist activism, became a stronghold for leftist influence among unions and worker committees in this period (though Tripoli's traditional leaders like the Karami clan also tried to maintain patronage control). In sum, on the eve of the **Lebanese Civil War** in 1975, the labor movement was both at a peak of mobilization and deeply fractured. The official CGTL had unified nominally all unions but was strained by internal contradictions; simultaneously, independent class struggles were erupting in ways that transcended formal union structures – a fact that would influence the early sparks of the civil war.

The Civil War Era (1975–1990): Fragmentation, Survival, and Civil Resistance

On April 13, 1975, sectarian clashes in Beirut – the "Ain al-Rummaneh incident" – ignited the **Lebanese Civil War**. Just weeks before, in late February 1975, a labor-related protest in the southern port city of **Sidon (Saida)** had provided a grim foreshadowing of the violence to come. There, fishermen and their supporters staged a mass demonstration on February 26, 1975, against a government-sanctioned monopoly over Lebanon's fishing waters [49] [50]. The policy in question would have granted exclusive fishing rights to a private company called Protein (notably backed by former President Camille Chamoun), undermining the livelihood of thousands of small fisherfolk [50] [51]. The protest in Sidon drew broad participation from leftist and nationalist groups – including the Sidon-based populist leader Maarouf Saad – and quickly turned bloody when the army opened fire [52]. Saad, a unionist and head of the Fishermen's Cooperative, was mortally wounded by gunfire and later died, and around a dozen protesters were injured [52]. This incident inflamed tensions between the marginalized (backed by leftist parties and Palestinian militants) and the state (backed by right-wing militias), and **"foreshadowed many of the internal ingredients that were to ignite the Civil War"** [53].

Once the war began in earnest, Lebanon's socio-economic fabric was torn apart, and the labor movement faced unprecedented challenges. Factories and industrial zones – especially in Beirut's suburbs – became

battlegrounds, literally halting production and scattering workforces [54]. Agricultural regions turned into war zones or fell under Israeli occupation (as in the South), disrupting peasant movements [55]. As the conflict progressed, Lebanon fragmented into militia-controlled cantons. **Militias supplanted the state** in many areas, running their own patronage networks, taxing local businesses, and even providing some social services – a phenomenon dubbed the "militia economy" [56]. This war economy was fueled by outside money (e.g. foreign aid to militias, notably the Palestine Liberation Organization's funds, which by one estimate contributed 15% of Lebanon's GDP in the late 1970s) and by wartime profiteering [57]. For a time in the late 1970s, these infusions masked the economic collapse; wages were paid and basic state functions limped on [58]. But after the Israeli invasion of 1982 and the expulsion of the PLO, Lebanon's economy went into freefall: the currency depreciated catastrophically and inflation exceeded 400% in 1987 [59]. State institutions had all but disintegrated by the late 1980s [60].

In this environment, labor unions could no longer function as they did pre-war. Many **grassroots leftist organizations** that had energized the labor movement in the early 1970s were decimated – some activists took up arms in militias, others were victims of violence or displacement [61] [62]. With the left-leaning parties weakened (particularly after the Syrian army's suppression of Muslim-West Beirut in 1976 and Israel's crushing of the PLO in 1982), sectarian forces gained dominance. Nonetheless, the **CGTL (General Confederation)** managed to survive and even remain active, albeit under great constraints. During the first phase of the war (1975–1982), the CGTL still organized around economic demands. Despite the conflict, it succeeded in negotiating **periodic cost-of-living wage increases indexed to inflation** – essentially forcing militias and what was left of the government to adjust minimum wages as prices rose [63]. For example, through strikes and lobbying, the CGTL secured multiple raises in the minimum wage up until 1982, maintaining a rough parity with skyrocketing living costs [63]. It also achieved sector-specific gains; one cited victory was extending NSSF social insurance coverage to the previously ineligible **taxi drivers**, a significant informal workforce in Beirut [64] [65].

However, as war dragged on, union activism increasingly ran up against the realities of militia rule. Different parts of the country were controlled by rival factions (Christian right-wing forces in the east and north of Beirut, Muslim-leftist and Palestinian forces in West Beirut and much of the south), making nationwide labor coordination extremely difficult. Moreover, militias themselves tried to **co-opt or control unions** in their zones. An example came in 1983: After Israel's 1982 invasion, the Christian **Kataeb (Phalangist) Party** and its allies dominated the government. President Amin Gemayel (Bachir Gemayel's brother and Kataeb leader) sought to install a loyalist as head of the CGTL. In the 1983 CGTL leadership elections, Gemayel exerted heavy pressure for Joseph Nasr – a Kataeb member – to be elected Secretary-General [66]. This was part of Kataeb's broader effort to extend its control over civil institutions during its brief ascendancy [67]. The attempt alarmed the remaining leftist unions (whose political allies were at that moment literally fighting Israeli occupation in the south) [68]. In a twist of fate, a sudden political crisis diverted the President's attention, allowing an independent candidate, **Antoine Bechara**, to win the CGTL leadership instead [68]. Bechara, who was respected across communal lines, thus became CGTL president, preserving some union autonomy in the mid-1980s [69].

By that stage, the confederation had begun redefining its mission. With the economy in ruins and normal collective bargaining impossible, the CGTL increasingly focused on the **civil peace issue**. Union discourse shifted from specific labor conditions ("particular effects") to the overarching "general cause" of ending the war [60]. In 1986, under Bechara's leadership, the CGTL made a bold leap into the political arena by launching what became known as the **"civil resistance"** movement against the war [70]. In July 1986, the CGTL declared a month of popular struggle and called a **national general strike on July 3, 1986**,

demanding an end to militia fighting, an end to hunger and soaring prices, and the formation of a unity government to tackle the economic emergency [71]. This was followed by dramatic acts of protest that cut across the front-lines of the civil war: On October 15, 1987, unions organized the first **mass march across the Green Line**, the infamous no-man's-land dividing East and West Beirut [72]. Thousands of Lebanese from both sides gathered to demand national reconciliation. Then on November 5, 1987, the CGTL called an **open-ended general strike** that effectively paralyzed much of the country for five days [73]. The main slogans of these actions were explicitly political – above all, *stop the war* – alongside calls to curb hyperinflation and provide social protection for the impoverished [74]. These unprecedented demonstrations of unity and popular frustration rattled the warlords. Militias responded with pressure and occasional violence to discourage further cross-sectarian protests [75]. By 1988–89, as battles intensified again, the frequency and size of such protests dwindled, but they continued intermittently until literally days before the war's end [76] [75]. On October 22, 1989, Lebanon's surviving parliamentarians signed the **Taif Agreement** in Saudi Arabia, which laid out a framework to end the war and political reforms. The CGTL, which had welcomed the prospect of any peace plan, greeted Taif with cautious optimism [77]. Unionists were particularly encouraged that the Taif Accord explicitly mentioned *"balanced development"* and proposed a social and economic council with labor participation to guide reconstruction [77]. For a moment, it seemed the labor movement might have a seat at the table in post-war Lebanon.

Post-War Reconstruction (1990s): Unions Between Resistance and Co-optation

The civil war formally ended in 1990, and a new era of Syrian tutelage and reconstruction began, often dubbed the "Pax Syriana." In the early 1990s, Lebanon's unions enjoyed a brief renaissance of influence before facing another wave of political co-optation. **Syria**, which emerged as the power-broker under the Taif Agreement, oversaw the formation of post-war governments and ensured key institutions were dominated by its Lebanese allies [78] [79]. At the same time, **Rafiq Hariri**, a billionaire with close ties to Saudi Arabia (and an understanding with Syria), became prime minister after the first post-war elections in 1992 [80]. Hariri's vision for Lebanon was one of rapid neoliberal reconstruction: revitalizing Beirut as a regional financial hub through massive private investment, upscale real-estate projects (like the downtown rebuilding by his company Solidere), currency stabilization via high-interest debt, and an open-door policy to foreign capital [81] [82]. These policies led to high GDP growth in the mid-1990s, but also soaring public debt, austerity measures, and widening social inequality. The stage was set for conflict between organized labor and the new economic order.

Initially, the **CGTL** emerged from the war with enhanced credibility. Its leadership in the late-1980s anti-war protests had earned it robust popular support [83]. Moreover, many members of the pre-war political elite had been swept aside (killed, exiled, or marginalized) by the war, potentially giving unions more political space [84]. In the early 1990s, the CGTL thus had an opportunity to assert greater independence and push a pro-worker agenda. In May 1993, **Elias Abu Rizk**, a veteran unionist from the Federation of United Unions, was elected Secretary-General of the CGTL [85] [86]. Abu Rizk's rise was significant: He represented the more militant, left-leaning faction of the labor movement. His election signaled that the CGTL was reorienting toward a **more radical, oppositional stance**, prepared to challenge Hariri's neoliberal program head-on [85] [87].

Tensions between labor and the new government surfaced almost immediately. Even before Hariri took office, the country experienced an economic crisis in 1992 with a rapid devaluation of the Lebanese pound.

As inflation surged and living standards deteriorated, the CGTL, still under interim leadership, called a massive **general strike on May 6, 1992** [88]. The strike drew wide participation across Lebanon to protest the government's failure to curb price increases and currency collapse [89]. Its impact was dramatic: Within days, Prime Minister Omar Karami resigned under pressure from the streets [90]. This was a stunning display of union power – arguably the first time a general strike directly toppled a Lebanese cabinet. The incoming regime (soon dominated by Hariri) took careful note. According to contemporary accounts, the emerging post-war ruling class resolved to **"neutralize the transgressive power"** of the CGTL after seeing Karami fall [91]. In other words, even as they publicly courted reconciliation, Lebanon's new leaders quietly sought to **rein in the unions** and prevent them from derailing the reconstruction agenda.

Their first strategy was an attempt at structural reform of the labor movement – ostensibly modernizing it, but in effect aiming to weaken leftist influence. In late 1992, Labor Minister Abdallah al-Amin (close to Syria) proposed a state-supervised overhaul of the CGTL based on a "one profession, one union" principle [92]. This plan, formulated with input from the **International Labour Organization (ILO)**, would have reorganized unions along industrial lines and potentially broken up the existing federations [93]. The CGTL leadership perceived it as a threat intended to dissolve their power base. Abu Rizk and his allies managed to thwart this initiative – notably by lobbying Syria itself to veto the idea [94]. The fact that unionists went to the Syrian authorities underscores how decisively Syria controlled Lebanese politics at the time; the CGTL had to appeal to the Syrian overseers to protect itself from the Lebanese government's schemes [94]. With the structural reform foiled, the Labor Minister shifted tactics to a more classic approach: interfering in union elections.

As the May 1993 CGTL leadership election approached, Minister al-Amin tried to engineer a split between Abu Rizk's leftist camp and the more moderate incumbent president Antoine Bechara [95]. He openly endorsed Abu Rizk (perhaps calculating that this would tarnish Abu Rizk's image as an opposition figure), while covertly assuring Bechara he'd support his re-election if Bechara distanced himself from the left [95]. The gambit failed – at the last minute, leftist federations threw their full weight behind Abu Rizk, and he won the internal vote, becoming CGTL president with an unprecedented share of leftists on the executive council [96]. For the first time in CGTL history, **leftist unions held most leadership posts** (a reflection of their grassroots strength in the post-war labor force) [97].

Under Abu Rizk's leadership (1993–1997), the CGTL adopted an outspoken **anti-neoliberal platform**. The confederation's agenda prioritized defending workers' acquired rights (such as existing pension schemes and labor law protections) and, crucially, protecting the **purchasing power of wages** in the face of inflation [98]. This entailed pushing for regular cost-of-living adjustments, price controls on basic goods, and rent control – essentially a social-democratic policy package to mitigate the harsh effects of Hariri's free-market reforms [98]. Conflict with Hariri's government was inevitable. One flashpoint was the issue of public sector wages. In Summer 1995, the government agreed to give long-overdue raises to public employees but decided to fund them by sharply increasing gasoline prices (a move hitting all consumers) [99]. The CGTL condemned this approach and called a **general strike and "day of national mobilization" on July 19, 1995** [99]. In response, Hariri's cabinet took the extreme step of **banning all demonstrations and public gatherings** nationwide – a measure rarely seen even in Lebanon's authoritarian past [100]. The heavy-handed ban, enforced by the security forces, succeeded in preventing large street protests that day, though it underscored the government's determination to quash dissent [100].

Undeterred, the CGTL resumed agitation in early 1996. In February 1996, public school teachers and Lebanese University professors went on strike demanding a raise in their salary scale commensurate with

inflation [101]. The CGTL joined their cause, scheduling a general strike for February 29, 1996 [101]. Again the state struck back with emergency powers: Another multi-month ban on demonstrations was declared, and on the planned strike day the army imposed a strict curfew, occupying the streets to prevent gatherings [102]. This confrontation came to a head on April 4, 1996, when unionists daringly defied the ban. Seizing the opportunity of a state visit by French President Jacques Chirac (and the accompanying media attention), the CGTL organized a protest march in Beirut to demand a **76% salary increase in both public and private sectors** [103]. The marchers also denounced the government's economic mismanagement and its curtailment of democratic freedoms [104]. Although soldiers blocked the protesters from reaching parliament, the unionists held a sit-in at the CGTL headquarters, drawing considerable press coverage [104]. Just a week later, however, Lebanon was thrown into turmoil by **Israel's "Grapes of Wrath" military operation** (April 1996), which shifted national attention back to security issues [105].

After the fighting subsided, Hariri's government attempted to placate discontent by unilaterally announcing a raise for private-sector wages. But the CGTL and the teachers' unions found the offer insufficient and pressed on with their campaign [105]. In a novel tactic, they threatened to boycott the grading of official school exams (the baccalaureate) and even to encourage voter boycotts of the upcoming 1996 parliamentary elections [106]. These combined pressures compelled the government to finally grant the teachers' salary demands [107]. Yet for Lebanon's rulers, the episode was the last straw – Abu Rizk's confrontational leadership had to be removed to ensure that such labor victories (and political embarrassments) would not continue.

The turning point came with the **CGTL internal elections of 1997**. The ruling elites, now firmly under Syrian oversight, executed a sophisticated plan to **capture the confederation from within**. The strategy involved flooding the CGTL with new unions that were effectively empty shells controlled by sectarian parties. In fact, as early as 1994, Antoine Bechara (the former union president who had since aligned with the government) began cultivating a parallel structure inside the labor movement. He took charge of an almost defunct federation – the **General Federation of Sectoral Unions (GCSU)** – and packed it with newly created unions sponsored by political parties [108]. This GCSU, kept technically separate from the CGTL (even having its CGTL executive council membership "frozen"), became a **"union farm" for the ruling parties** [109]. By 1997, as CGTL elections neared, the groundwork was in place. Labor Minister As'ad Hardan, himself a leader of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) and an ally of Syria, took a direct hand: He licensed five new union federations linked to **Nabih Berri's Amal Movement** and **forced the CGTL to admit them** despite protests [110]. These federations were largely based in southern Lebanon and intentionally aimed at breaking the influence of the independent-leftist **Federation of the South**, which was one of the strongest components of Abu Rizk's support [111].

On election day in August 1997, a tense showdown ensued. In the southern city of **Sidon**, where one block of delegates was to vote, Amal loyalists used intimidation: journalists and prominent pro-Abu Rizk union delegates were **detained by the army for hours**, and others were threatened, to ensure Amal-backed candidates' victory in that district [112] [113]. In **Beirut**, Abu Rizk's camp tried to outmaneuver the interference by holding the voting an hour early before government observers arrived [114]. This ploy failed; the Minister of Labor invalidated the early results and ordered a re-vote under official supervision [115]. Amid heavy army presence and reported clashes, the **Minister-backed candidate Ghanim Zoghbi (associated with Amal)** was declared the winner of the CGTL presidency [116]. Elias Abu Rizk denounced the election as fraudulent and filed a lawsuit. His defiance was met with personal retribution – Abu Rizk was briefly **arrested** by authorities, effectively eliminating him as a political threat at that time [117].

Although the government's "coup" seemed complete, union politics remained volatile. By 1998, divisions within the regime came into play: **Rafiq Hariri** lost his first premiership that year, and a rivalry between him and Parliament Speaker **Nabih Berri** (leader of Amal) created cracks in the alliance that had co-opted the unions [118]. As a result, Ghanim Zoghbi (seen as Berri's man) resigned under pressure. In a surprising twist, **Abu Rizk returned to the CGTL leadership in 1998** – reportedly thanks to last-minute backing from Berri (indicating a temporary alignment of interests between the once hostile Amal and Abu Rizk factions) [119] [120]. Abu Rizk defeated a Hariri-supported candidate (none other than Antoine Bechara) to regain the confederation's presidency [118].

By then, however, the integrity of the labor movement had been irreparably compromised. The scale of **union proliferation and politicization** in the 1990s was staggering. The number of licensed union federations exploded from 14 (pre-war) to 37 by 1999, and individual unions multiplied from around 140 to over 210 [121]. Investigations indicated that at least two-thirds of these unions were essentially *fictitious*, existing only on paper to carry the influence of various political patrons [121]. A detailed breakdown circa 2000 showed how the CGTL's executive council seats were divvied up among sectarian-political blocs: Out of 70 seats, **29 were controlled by pro-Syrian parties** (Amal, Hezbollah, SSNP, Ba'ath), **18 by independent leftists and the Communist Party**, and **13 by Hariri's Future Movement and its Christian allies (Phalange and Lebanese Forces)** [122]. In effect, the confederation had become a microcosm of Lebanon's post-war sectarian spoils system, with each major party inserting its clients. This **new sectarian power-sharing in the CGTL** became evident in the next union elections in 2001, which saw Berri's Amal Movement cement its hegemony: **Ghassan Ghosn**, the Amal-backed candidate, won the presidency, heralding what was described as the "full-fledged victory" of Amal in the labor movement [123] [124].

Even after Syrian troops withdrew from Lebanon in 2005, the legacy of the 1990s co-optation persisted. The politicization of unions only deepened in the early 2000s. A tragic episode underscored both the power and the peril of mobilization in this era. On May 27, 2004, the CGTL (still under a leadership aligned with Amal and other pro-Syrian factions) organized a large **general strike** and demonstrations against new austerity measures and tax hikes (including another fuel price increase) imposed by the Hariri government [125]. Among the protesters were unions of **taxi and minibus drivers**, many of which were controlled or influenced by Amal, Hezbollah, and the Lebanese Communist Party [126]. As a convoy of these drivers headed towards Beirut's southern suburbs, the Lebanese Army moved to block them. Clashes erupted, escalating into widespread riots across the southern Beirut area (a stronghold of Amal/Hezbollah) [126]. Demonstrators even stormed the Ministry of Labor building in anger. The confrontation resulted in **five protesters dead and hundreds injured** [127]. The political fallout was significant: Hezbollah – perhaps wary of being seen as fomenting unrest or getting workers killed – ordered its union delegate to resign from the CGTL council, and both the Communist Party (LCP) and the PSP (Socialists led by Walid Jumblatt) distanced themselves from the confederation [128]. From that point, the CGTL became almost entirely an **Amal-controlled bastion**, with little participation from other opposition parties or independent leftists [129]. This isolation further eroded the confederation's credibility as a representative of all workers.

By the mid-2000s, therefore, the labor movement's once promising post-war resurgence had given way to deep fragmentation and subordination to sectarian politics. After Prime Minister Hariri's **assassination in 2005**, Lebanon's political scene split into two rival coalitions – the pro-Syrian **March 8** bloc (led by Hezbollah and Amal, with Christian allies like Michel Aoun's FPM) and the anti-Syrian **March 14** bloc (led by Saad Hariri's Future Movement, with the Lebanese Forces, Phalange, and allies) [130]. This polarization was **mirrored within the CGTL**. The confederation's leadership remained dominated by March 8-aligned unionists (primarily Amal's network), while a minority "opposition" of March 14-affiliated unions formed an

internal bloc against them [131]. Essentially, the labor body was split along the same sectarian-party lines as the government, rendering it incapable of united action on labor's behalf. Meanwhile, the number of officially registered unions continued to balloon as politicians created more phantom syndicates to bolster their quotas – by 2010, Lebanon had an astounding **580 unions and 51 federations on the books** [132], despite unionized workers being only a tiny fraction of the workforce. Many "unions" represented trades that barely existed anymore, while vast segments of the labor force (especially in new professions or informal jobs) had no union representation at all [133] [134]. As one scholar noted, professional syndicates and the CGTL alike became mere "**terrain for political patronage and competition completely void of socio-economic concerns**" [135].

The **sectarian takeover of unions** had profound consequences for Lebanon's working class. It effectively neutralized organized labor as an independent force. With the CGTL leadership tied to the ruling oligarchy, workers lost an effective formal platform to champion their interests [136]. This power vacuum made it easier for successive governments to implement neoliberal policies (privatization, regressive taxation, public sector wage freezes, etc.) that undermined workers' rights and living standards [137]. In short, **the late 1990s co-optation of the CGTL marked a crucial setback** for labor's capacity to mobilize collectively [138]. The energy and hopes of the early post-war union movement dissipated. Union membership declined and many workers grew apathetic or skeptical of unions that appeared to be extensions of sectarian parties [136].

Fragmentation and New Labor Movements in the 2000s

With the official unions largely paralyzed or co-opted in the 2000s, labor activism in Lebanon found alternative outlets. Labor conflict did not disappear – but it was increasingly channeled through **informal groups, professional associations, and ad hoc coalitions** rather than the CGTL. A new generation of workers and activists began to organize around specific grievances, often outside the traditional union framework [139]. These struggles were more atomized and lacked the nationwide coordination or ideological backing that earlier movements (like the 1970s left) had [139]. Nevertheless, by the early 2010s, a series of labor and social mobilizations signaled a modest revival of "street" politics focused on economic rights.

A notable wave of labor actions occurred from **2011 to 2014**, a period that coincided with the Arab Spring and local dissatisfaction with worsening economic conditions. After roughly a decade of quiescence (the 2000s saw few major labor protests beyond partisan union rallies), workers in multiple sectors erupted in protest [140]. One catalyst was the precarious situation of contract workers at **Électricité du Liban (EDL)**, the national electricity company. In November 2011, the government announced a plan to outsource EDL's support services to three private contractors, a move that threatened to eliminate the jobs of hundreds of day laborers and meter collectors (some estimates said a 70% staff cut over two years) [141] [142]. In response, the EDL day-workers – many of whom had been chronically temporary employees with no benefits – formed a committee and launched an **open-ended strike** in May 2012 [142]. The strike lasted **93 days**, bringing parts of Lebanon's electricity maintenance to a halt [143]. The workers organized frequent sit-ins and demonstrations across the country, showing an unexpected ability to coordinate despite lacking formal union recognition [144]. Under public pressure, Parliament eventually promised that all the strikers would be absorbed as full-time employees, and the strike was suspended when the workers were temporarily hired by the subcontractor firms (with hopes of later gaining tenure) [145]. However, when it became clear by 2014 that the companies intended to retain less than half of them, the EDL day-workers launched another dramatic action: They **occupied EDL's headquarters in Beirut** for four months in 2014, turning the building's plaza into a tent city of protesting workers [146]. Although this sit-in drew significant

sympathy, the workers' demands (permanent jobs and benefits) remained unmet for a long time [147]. The EDL struggle highlighted the plight of many Lebanese workers in outsourced, unstable jobs and became emblematic of resistance to public sector privatization [141].

Another major movement arose around the issue of public sector pay and the **minimum wage**. In 2011, then-Labor Minister **Charbel Nahhas** (a left-leaning technocrat in Najib Mikati's government) proposed an ambitious program to substantially raise wages and strengthen social benefits, aligning them with years of accumulated inflation [148]. He also suggested financing these increases by taxing real estate and financial rents – measures fiercely opposed by the business elite and much of the political class [148]. Although a partial minimum wage hike for the private sector was enacted (to LL 680,000, roughly \$450 at the time) [149], the fight shifted to the **public sector**. Civil servants and public school teachers had not received any salary scale adjustment since the 1990s, and they mobilized to demand a long-promised **"new salary scale"** with raises of around 121% to make up for inflation [150]. The **Union Coordination Committee (UCC)**, an umbrella coordinating body for public sector employee leagues (including the League of Public Servants, the Association of Public Secondary School Teachers, the primary teachers' league, and the Association of Private School Teachers), took charge of this campaign [151] [150]. Under the leadership of **Hanna Gharib**, a leftist schoolteacher, the UCC orchestrated a series of strikes, protests, and even exam boycotts from 2012 through 2014 [151] [152]. These actions repeatedly brought tens of thousands to the streets, uniting teachers, civil servants, and their families across sectarian divides. The UCC's movement was one of the largest non-sectarian mobilizations in Lebanon's recent history, and it openly challenged the oligarchy's austerity drive [153]. For a time, the UCC appeared to fill the vacuum left by the neutered CGTL, showing that large-scale worker organizing **"void of sectarian interference"** was still possible [154] [155]. The UCC even allied with other civil movements (such as a short-lived 2011 anti-sectarian youth protest movement) to push a broader message of social justice [156].

Ultimately, however, the UCC too fell victim to political **co-optation**. Its very success spooked the ruling elite, who feared a unified public sector union could become a lasting threat. By 2014–2015, reports emerged that in the internal elections of the teachers' leagues and civil servant associations, candidates aligned with establishment parties (whether March 8 or March 14) had joined forces to oust the independent leaders of the UCC [155] [157]. This **"Trojan horse" strategy** worked: The UCC's leadership was infiltrated by partisan figures, and Hanna Gharib and his comrades were eventually replaced or sidelined [158]. In 2015, the UCC's independence was pronounced dead by observers, as it ceased to mobilize effectively against the government's stalling on the salary scale [152]. (Notably, the salary scale was only finally passed in 2017 after years of delay, once the UCC was defunct as a protest force.) The CGTL, for its part, had played a **negative role** throughout the confrontation: It opposed Charbel Nahhas's pro-worker initiatives and did not support the UCC strikes, reflecting the CGTL's alignment with establishment interests at the time [159]. This betrayal further alienated rank-and-file public employees and union activists, prompting the small independent **Federation of National Trade Unions (FENASOL)** to formally break away from the CGTL in disgust [159].

FENASOL deserves mention as one of the few institutional remnants of the left-wing union tradition. Led by Castro Abdallah, FENASOL had existed as a minor federation within the CGTL but, after 2011, styled itself as an alternative union federation willing to collaborate with NGOs and social movements. Although its size was limited and it did not become a mass force, FENASOL actively supported various "**anti-systemic**" struggles from 2011 onward [160]. For example, FENASOL worked with migrant-rights organizations and the International Labour Organization to establish a groundbreaking **Domestic Workers Union** in 2015 [161]. This initiative aimed to help **migrant domestic workers** (mostly women from Africa and Asia employed in Lebanese households under the onerous kafala sponsorship system) organize for their rights [161]. Domestic

workers in Lebanon are excluded from the labor law and until then had no union representation. The union was formed and announced publicly – an unprecedented move in the Arab Gulf/Middle East context – and it petitioned the Ministry of Labor for official recognition [162]. The ministry, reflecting the political sensitivity, **refused to license** the domestic workers' union, effectively deeming it illegal [163]. Nonetheless, the very act of its creation raised public awareness about the exploitation of migrant workers and forged new alliances between labor activists, feminist groups, and anti-racist campaigners [164].

In the **private sector**, pockets of labor activism also emerged in the 2010s outside the CGTL's orbit. Two examples stand out. First, the **union of bank employees** – historically one of the earliest professional unions in Lebanon – waged a successful fight in 2013 to renew their sectoral **collective contract**, preserving benefits that some banks wanted to roll back [165]. Second, workers at the Spinneys supermarket chain undertook a bold unionization drive in 2012. Spinneys, a major retailer, was accused of abusive labor practices and underpaying staff. Employees, with the support of FENASOL and civil society activists, formed a union and campaigned for wage increases and the right to collective bargaining [166]. Despite intimidation and the firing of some union organizers, the Spinneys workers' effort drew public support and eventually secured official recognition of their union in late 2012 [166]. The Spinneys case was significant as a rare instance of new private-sector union formation in post-war Lebanon, and it highlighted issues of union-busting and corporate power that had been largely absent from the Lebanese public discourse.

By the late 2010s, Lebanon's economy was deteriorating severely, culminating in a full-blown financial crisis by 2019. Years of austerity, corruption, and debt accumulation set the stage for an eruption of popular anger. In **October 2019**, a government proposal to tax WhatsApp calls (seen as the last straw) triggered spontaneous protests that rapidly evolved into a nationwide **uprising** against the entire ruling class. The **October 17, 2019 uprising** (thawrat 17 Tishrin) brought hundreds of thousands of Lebanese into the streets of Beirut, Tripoli, Sidon, and smaller towns, demanding an end to sectarian patronage, corruption, and economic injustice [167]. Protesters chanted for revolution and denounced all sectarian political leaders (shouting *"All of them means all of them"*). The movement was notable for its cross-sectarian, cross-regional solidarity: people from different communities and classes rallying together.

A striking feature of the 2019 uprising was the **absence of the traditional unions**. The CGTL and its federations, tied to establishment parties, did not mobilize their members to join the protests – in fact, the CGTL leadership remained largely silent or even critical of the demonstrations [168]. This "loud absence of trade unions" was widely noted and lamented by observers [169]. It underscored just how disconnected the official labor bodies had become from grassroots grievances. However, the uprising did spur new forms of labor organizing. One of the most interesting developments was the creation of the **Lebanese Association of Professionals (LAP)**, an umbrella group seeking to unite independent professional syndicates and worker groups as part of the protest movement [170]. The idea was inspired by the **Sudanese Professionals Association**, which had led a successful uprising in Sudan in 2019 [171]. The seed of the LAP was planted by a group of dissident university professors (the **Association of Independent University Professors**) who got involved in the October protests and saw the need for a broad-based alternative to the co-opted official unions [172]. Within weeks, the LAP brought together informal networks of **journalists, lawyers, doctors, engineers, architects, artists**, and other professionals who were frustrated with their existing syndicates' subservience to political parties [173]. Through social media and on-the-ground meetings, these groups coordinated under the LAP's banner, advocating for the protest movement's goals of accountability and social justice [173]. Remarkably, the nascent independent unions achieved tangible wins in the following months. In November 2019, an independent reformist candidate, **Melhem Khalaf**, was elected head of the Beirut Bar Association (the lawyers' syndicate) – a position historically controlled by establishment figures

[174] . Khalaf's victory, seen as a triumph of the civic movement, was followed by another in mid-2021, when an alliance of independents won the leadership of the **Order of Engineers and Architects in Beirut**, breaking the grip of traditional parties on that influential professional order [175] . These were hailed as major breakthroughs in wresting professional organizations from sectarian patronage, indicating that the energy of October 17 had not been completely snuffed out [176] .

However, the broader picture for workers **"on the ground"** remained dire. The uprising did not immediately translate into new unions for the vast majority of wage earners, especially those in manual, service, or informal jobs. The LAP's successes were mainly among professional middle-class groups, while **waged and informal labor remained atomized and under-organized** in the wake of the uprising [177] . The collapse of Lebanon's economy in 2020–2021 (with the currency losing over 90% of its value and poverty soaring) has led to numerous strikes and protests – by nurses, teachers, public transport drivers, civil servants, and others – but these tend to be short-term and sector-specific. With the CGTL still viewed as a politicized shell and no single new labor federation yet rising to prominence, Lebanese workers face the current crisis largely without a unified collective voice. As of the mid-2020s, the question remains whether new independent unions or coalitions (like a revived LAP or perhaps a reborn UCC) can coalesce to fill that void, or whether the labor movement will continue its fragmented existence until broader political change occurs.

Timeline of Key Events and Developments (1945–2025)

- **1946:** First Lebanese Labour Code enacted after union-led strikes; trade unions gain legal recognition but under strict state controls [2] .
- **1940s–50s:** Government licenses pro-regime labor federations (e.g. **United Unions** in 1952 under Gabriel Khouri) to marginalize leftist unions [6] [9] .
- **1958:** Three federations merge to form the **General Confederation of Workers and Employees of Lebanon (CGTL)**, headed by Khouri, as the first national union confederation [14] . Shortly after, the **1958 political crisis** erupts; labor movement activity pauses during the conflict [18] .
- **1963: National Social Security Fund (NSSF)** established under President Chehab to provide worker benefits [19] . Implementation meets employer resistance through late 1960s [20] .
- **1965:** Massive peasant rally in Btekhnay (10,000 participants) signals rising rural protest, supported by leftist parties [40] .
- **1967:** All nine union federations form the **Supreme Council of Labor Unions** to coordinate demands amid economic downturn [25] .
- **1970: CGTL unification** – previously excluded leftist federations join, making CGTL sole umbrella for 9 federations [29] . Internal voting rules, however, give right-wing unions dominance, sowing future discord [32] .
- **1972:** Major **general strike and factory occupations** (e.g. Ghandour food factory) and a nationwide strike on November 13, 1972, press for wage hikes; violent confrontations occur [47] .
- **1973: Tobacco Régie strike** by tobacco workers/farmers demanding better prices; army crackdown kills protesters [48] [47] .
- **Feb 1975: Sidon fishermen's strike** against a fishing monopoly; army fire wounds protest leader Maarouf Saad (who later dies) and kills/injures others [50] [52] . This incident heightens tensions on eve of war.
- **Apr 1975: Lebanese Civil War begins**. Industrial areas shut down, unions struggle under militia rule [54] .

- **1976–82:** CGTL manages periodic **wage indexation** deals to offset inflation [63]. Some social gains (e.g. taxi drivers get NSSF coverage) achieved despite war [64].
- **1983:** President Amin Gemayel attempts to install a Kataeb loyalist as CGTL head; instead **Antoine Bechara** (independent) elected CGTL president amid war pressures [66] [68].
- **1986:** Under Bechara, CGTL launches **national general strike (July 3)** demanding end to war [71].
- **Oct 1987:** CGTL organizes first **march across Green Line** uniting East/West Beirut protesters [72].
- **Nov 1987: Open-ended general strike** paralyzes country for 5 days; main demand is to stop the civil war [74].
- **1989: Taif Agreement** ends the civil war; CGTL welcomes its socio-economic provisions [77].
- **May 1992: General strike** over currency collapse forces PM Omar Karami to resign [88].
- **Oct 1992:** Rafiq **Hariri becomes PM**; begins neoliberal reconstruction policies [80].
- **1993: Elias Abu Rizk** (leftist) elected CGTL Secretary-General, marking a high point of union independence [85].
- **1995:** CGTL calls **general strike** vs Hariri's fuel price hike; government bans demonstrations, using army to suppress protests [99].
- **Apr 1996:** CGTL defies ban with protest during Chirac visit, demanding 76% wage hike and criticizing Hariri's economic policies [103].
- **Aug 1997:** Government intervenes in **CGTL elections**: Minister Hardan floods CGTL with Amal-aligned unions; **Ghanim Zoghbi (Amal)** installed as CGTL head amid irregularities [113] [178]. Abu Rizk is arrested after contesting results [117].
- **1998:** Abu Rizk briefly regains CGTL leadership (with Amal's backing) as Zoghbi resigns; but union federation is already fragmented by fake unions [118] [121].
- **2001: Ghassan Ghosn (Amal)** wins CGTL leadership; by now pro-Syrian parties control a plurality of union seats [179].
- **May 2004: General strike by CGTL** against austerity ends in riots in Beirut's suburbs; army kills 5 protesters [125]. Hezbollah, LCP, PSP withdraw from CGTL after this, leaving it dominated by Amal [128].
- **2005:** Assassination of Hariri; Syria withdraws. Labor movement split along **March 8 vs March 14** lines inside CGTL [130]. Union proliferation continues (580 unions by 2010) [132].
- **2011:** Outbreak of Arab Spring and local unrest. **Electricité du Liban (EDL) contract workers** mobilize in late 2011; by 2012 launch a 93-day strike against outsourcing (one of the longest in Lebanese labor history) [141] [144].
- **2012: Union Coordination Committee (UCC)** (public sector teachers and employees) begins large strikes and protests for wage scale adjustment [151] [152]. Tens of thousands protest non-sectarianly for salary increases.
- **2012: Spinneys supermarket workers** form a union and campaign for better pay; their union is officially recognized after management's anti-union efforts draw public ire [166].
- **2013: Bank employees' union** strikes to defend collective contract, successfully renewing it [165].
- **2015: Domestic Workers Union** established (with ILO and FENASOL support) to represent migrant household workers – first of its kind in Arab region – but government refuses to license it [162].
- **2015:** UCC's independence is undermined as sectarian parties infiltrate its leadership, effectively neutralizing the movement after 3 years of protests [158].
- **Oct 2019: October 17 Uprising** begins – a massive cross-sectarian revolt against the ruling elite and economic mismanagement [167]. CGTL and traditional unions are absent, but new groups like **Lebanese Association of Professionals (LAP)** form to organize professionals in the revolution [170].
- **Nov 2019: Melhem Khalaf**, independent candidate backed by protest movement, wins presidency of Beirut Bar Association (lawyers) [174].

- **2020:** Economic crisis deepens with currency collapse; sporadic strikes by nurses, teachers, and others occur (e.g. school teachers strike for dollarized salaries in late 2020), though without CGTL coordination.
- **2021:** Independent reformist list **"Naqaba Tantafid"** wins Beirut Engineers Order elections, displacing party-backed syndicate leaders [175].
- **2022–2023:** Ongoing crisis prompts intermittent sectoral strikes (e.g. public school teachers strike for weeks in early 2023 over pay; bank depositors protests), but labor movement remains fragmented and largely ineffective at forcing policy change.

Major Unions and Federations in Lebanon (1945–Present) and Their Political Affiliations

Union/Federation	Founded	Characteristics and Political Affiliation
Federation of Trade Unions of Workers and Employees (FTUWE)	1944	First post-independence labor federation; left-leaning (included communists). Pressed for labor law, but **banned after 1946** Labour Code (operated illegally) [4]. Affiliated with WFTU (Soviet bloc) unofficially.
General Confederation of Lebanese Workers (GCLW/CGTL)	1958	Umbrella confederation uniting most licensed unions. Initially **government-aligned** and anti-communist (led by Gabriel Khouri, supported by President Chamoun and U.S./ICFTU) [13] [9]. By 1970, included leftist unions but internally dominated by conservative/corporatist unions [32]. In civil war, took neutral/peace stance. Post-1990, became a battleground of rival parties: **1993–1997 under Abu Rizk** – relatively independent, leftist influence [85]; **Late 1990s onward** – heavily **co-opted by sectarian elites** (especially Amal Movement) [179] [128]. Today, largely controlled by March 8 parties (Amal), with a token March 14 opposition [130].
Federation of the United Unions of Lebanon	1952	Coalition of anti-left independent unions led by Gabriel Khouri [6]. Strong ties to Maronite Church and Western (U.S.) support [180]. Merged into CGTL in 1958 as dominant faction [13].
Federation of Independent Unions	1952	Cluster of craft unions led by Abdel Majid Mhiu (split from communist-led league) [15]. Also merged into CGTL in 1958. Generally conservative/craft-based.
Federation of Unions of Workers and Employees of the North	1954	Regional federation in **Tripoli/North Lebanon** under patronage of Sunni za'im Rashid Karami [15]. Reflected local sectarian influence in unions. Became part of CGTL 1970.
League of Workers' Unions (exact name varies)	~1940s–50s	An earlier federation or "league" that likely included many unions affiliated with the Communist Party or Arab nationalists (possibly an alias for FTUWE post-ban). Not officially recognized in 1950s (operated semi-clandestinely). Joined CGTL unity in 1958 (hence "League" mentioned as merging) [13].

Union/Federation	Founded	Characteristics and Political Affiliation
General Federation of Sectoral Unions (GCSU)	1970	Created in 1970 but inactive; **reactivated in 1994** by pro-government unionists (Antoine Bechara) as vehicle to host newly formed **party-sponsored unions** [108]. Served as parallel union structure for ruling parties, especially in 1990s.
Federation of National Trade Unions (FENASOL)	1990s?	Small federation with leftist orientation (included some former communist-affiliated unions). In 2015, split from CGTL over its pro-establishment stance [159]. Advocates for informal and migrant workers. Partnered with NGOs/ILO for domestic workers' union [161]. Not tied to sectarian parties; aligned with independent civil movements.
Union Coordination Committee (UCC) (public sector)	2006	Coalition of public sector unions/syndicates (teachers, civil servants). **Independent collective leadership (2006–2014)** led by Hanna Gharib (Communist) [150]. Mobilized large protests for wage increases (2012–14) [152]. **Co-opted in 2015** by cross-party interference, ceasing to be active [158]. Not a formal union federation but an alliance of professional leagues.
Lebanese Association of Professionals (LAP)	2019	Umbrella group of newly formed independent professional syndicates (lawyers, academics, engineers, doctors, journalists, etc.) created during the 2019 uprising [170]. **Affiliation:** Oppositional/ anti-establishment (inspired by Sudanese Professionals). Helped independents win syndicate elections (Beirut Bar, Engineers Order) [176]. Still evolving; challenges sectarian control of professional orders [174].
Syndicate of Spinneys Workers (example private union)	2012	Company-specific union at Spinneys retail chain. **Affiliation:** Supported by FENASOL and NGOs (independent). Faced management retaliation; became symbol of new private-sector organizing [166].
Electricity (EDL) Daily Workers Committee	~2004	Informal committee of contract workers at state electric co. **Affiliation:** Independent grassroots. Dormant early on, it led major strikes in 2012–2014 against outsourcing [142] [181]. Coordinated outside CGTL framework; collaborated with some MPs and media for support (no formal party ties).

Table: Major labor union bodies in Lebanon, their formation, and political or sectarian alignments over time. Note that many professional associations (lawyers, engineers, doctors, etc.) also function as unions; most were historically dominated by sectarian parties until recent independent wins (2019–21).

Conclusion

From the first post-independence strikes of the 1940s to the protest movements of the 21st century, Lebanese labor unions have been deeply entangled with the country's political currents. In the early decades, unions provided a rare cross-sectarian platform for workers, scoring important gains like the 1946

labor law and subsequent social benefits. Yet labor's strength also made it a target for manipulation: during the **Cold War**, ruling elites – with foreign backing – created tame unions to undermine leftist influence [9] [10]. The **General Confederation of Labor (CGTL)** emerged in 1958 as both a tool of the state and, paradoxically, a potential vehicle for worker unity [13]. The 1960s saw unions flex their muscles amid economic crisis, uniting in 1970 and linking up with wider social struggles from the factory floor to the farm fields [30] [37]. At the brink of the 1975 civil war, the labor movement had reached a high-water mark of mobilization, with notable strikes (like Ghandour 1972, Régie 1973) jolting the nation [47]. But the war itself shattered that momentum. Unions were constrained by violence and sectarian fragmentation, though the CGTL's brave anti-war campaigns in the 1980s showed labor could still exert moral and political leadership [71] [74].

In the post-war era of the 1990s, Lebanon's unions faced a new test: participating in rebuilding the state while retaining autonomy. Initially, the CGTL under Elias Abu Rizk stood up to the neoliberal policies of the Hariri government, even toppling a prime minister in 1992 and challenging austerity measures in the streets [88] [99]. This period demonstrated the potential power of a unified labor voice in a democratic context. However, it also triggered a concerted counter-offensive by the sectarian political class. Through legal chicanery and brute force, the ruling parties **hollowed out the union sector** – proliferating empty unions, rigging union elections, and allocating union leadership positions as sectarian spoils [121] [182]. By the 2000s, the once-vibrant CGTL had been largely transformed into a clientelist institution, more accountable to party leaders than to workers. The co-optation of labor coincided with and facilitated the **entrenchment of neoliberal, sectarian governance** – as scholars note, weakening collective labor allowed the post-war oligarchy to implement policies that worsened inequality and precarity for the working class [137].

Yet, the spirit of labor resistance never fully died. In the 2010s, facing socioeconomic deterioration, workers and employees began organizing outside the old structures. The **Union Coordination Committee's mass strikes (2012–2014)** proved that large-scale labor action beyond sectarian lines was still achievable in Lebanon [152]. And although the UCC was eventually neutralized by the same divide-and-rule tactics used on the CGTL [158], its legacy inspired new thinking about independent unionism. The late 2010s brought further change, as an entire generation lost faith in sectarian politics. The **October 2019 uprising** crystallized this shift: while official unions were conspicuously absent, a new cohort of professional and informal worker organizations arose to demand systemic change [169] [170]. The success of independent candidates in professional syndicates after 2019 (e.g. lawyers, engineers) [176] shows that, in some arenas, the grip of sectarian patronage over organized labor can be loosened.

In conclusion, the modern history of Lebanese labor unions is one of **ebb and flow** – periods of remarkable unity and influence followed by periods of fragmentation and control by sectarian politics. Labor unions have at times been key players in Lebanese cities like Beirut and Tripoli, leading strikes that swayed national policy or stood at the forefront of civil resistance [88] [71]. But just as often, they have been sidelined or co-opted by the confessional power structure, reduced to "unions without workers" and "workers without unions," to quote a recent analysis [183]. The interplay between unions and political parties/sects – from the Phalangist attempts to dominate unions in the 1980s [66] to the Amal/Hizbullah vs Future rivalry inside the CGTL in the 2000s [130] – reflects the broader struggle over whether collective class interests can trump sectarian divides in Lebanon's polity. International actors, too, have left their mark: American and Soviet-bloc interventions during the Cold War shaped union affiliations [9], Arab and Western donors' aid (and conditions like the Paris III austerity) influenced labor policy, and the ILO and NGOs have tried to support independent unions in recent years [162].

As of 2025, Lebanon is in the throes of one of the worst economic crises in its history. The need for effective labor organization to defend workers' livelihoods is greater than ever. The historical record suggests that Lebanese labor movements have been most effective when they **transcended sectarian identities and aligned with broader social justice causes**, as seen in the 1970s and again in moments like 2012 or 2019 [184] [152]. Whether a rejuvenated labor movement can emerge from the shadow of sectarian politics in the coming years remains an open question. If it does, it will likely build on the foundations laid by those dissident unionists, teachers, and young professionals who, in recent times, have dared to revive the old rallying cry: *"Ya 'ummal Lubnan, ittaḥidū!" – Workers of Lebanon, unite!* [185] [186].

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These sources and others provide a foundation for understanding how labor unions in Lebanon have navigated – and been shaped by – the country's complex political landscape from 1945 to the present.

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