

Timeline: Labor Unions from 1768 to Today

1768 to 1794: From Strikes to the First Trade Union

The first recorded strike was in 1768. Shoemakers (called “Journeyman Tailors” back then) in New York went out to protest wage reductions.

26 years later, in 1794, shoemakers in Philadelphia collectivized to form the first trade union—called The Federal Society of Journeymen Cordwainers.

Footnote: the difference between “trade unions” and “labor unions” is that trade unions represent workers in a specific industry/trade, but a labor union can represent workers across industries/professions.

1794 to 1866: From Trade Unions to Labor Unions

In 1866, the first national labor union was formed (called the National Labor Union)—after trade unions from different industries started to collectivize themselves.

The National Labor Union, however, only lasted 7 years (until 1873) because of racial, ethnic, and gender divisions.

1869 to 1898: Social Divisions

In 1869, the Knights of Labor was formed with more inclusive principles.

Those inclusive ideals allowed several trade unions that couldn’t have joined the National Labor Union to now join the Knights of Labor. By 1886 the Knights of Labor outgrew itself and became the American Federation of Labor (AFL)—led by Samuel Gompers.

And although the AFL remained true to its inclusive principles for a few years, skilled white male workers eventually realized the ingress of African American, women, immigrant, and unskilled workers meant less demand for their own labor.

By 1898 (just over a decade after the AFL was founded) the AFL went back to the tendencies of earlier unions and created the white-only International Association of Mechanists.

1935 to Today: The AFL-CIO and the SOC

In 1935, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) formed as an alternative to the AFL.

By 1955, the CIO and AFL joined to create the “AFL-CIO”.

Then, in 2005, the Strategic Organizing Center (SOC)—founded as the Change to Win Federation (CtW)—split from the AFL-CIO to form its own labor union and once again provide an alternative.

To this day, the AFL-CIO and the SOC are the only alternatives and while there might seem to be some smaller unions, almost all those smaller unions operate under the umbrella of either of the AFL-CIO or the SOC.