Definition: labor union from QFinance: The Ultimate Resource

Organization representing employees’ interests; an organization of employees within a trade or profession that has the objective of representing its members’ interests, primarily through improving pay and conditions, and provides a variety of services. UK term trade union

Summary Article: union, labor
From The Columbia Encyclopedia

Association of workers for the purpose of improving their economic status and working conditions through collective bargaining with employers. Historically there have been two chief types of unions: the horizontal, or craft, union, in which all the members are skilled in a certain craft (e.g., the International Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America); and the vertical, or industrial, union, composed of workers in the same industry or industries regardless of their particular skills (e.g., the United Automobile, Aerospace, and Agricultural Implement Workers of America). A company union is an union for the employees of one company; it has no affiliation with other labor organizations and may be controlled by the employer.

In Great Britain

Although there were associations of journeymen under the medieval system of guilds, labor unions were essentially the product of the Industrial Revolution. In Great Britain after the French Revolution, fear of uprisings by the working classes led to passage of the Combination Acts, declaring unions illegal. Although those acts were repealed (1824), little progress was made in union growth until the organization of miners and textile workers in the 1860s, after which the struggle for legal recognition was waged with vigor. After the Trade Union Act of 1871, British labor unions were guaranteed legal recognition, although it required the laws of 1913 and 1915 to assure their status. In the latter part of the 19th cent. the socialist movement made headway among trade unionists, and James Keir Hardie induced (1893) the trade unions to join forces with the socialists in the Independent Labour party (see Labour party). The central organization of the British trade unions, the Trades Union Congress was formed in 1868 to coordinate and formulate policy on behalf of the whole labor movement.

On the Continent

Labor unions developed differently on the Continent than they did in Great Britain and in the United States, mainly because the European unions organized along industrial rather than along craft lines and because they engaged in more partisan political activity. In Germany the printers’ and cigarmakers’ unions were started after the uprisings of 1848; German unions until World War I were responsible for much social legislation. In France labor unions were organized in the early part of the 19th cent. but received no legal recognition until 1884. In most European countries labor organizations either are political parties or are affiliated with political parties, usually left-wing ones. In some European countries, notably Italy, Belgium, and the Netherlands, there are rival Christian and Socialist trade-union movements. In Russia, trade unions first appeared on a considerable scale in the revolution of 1905 but were later stamped out. They reappeared in the 1917 revolution and became highly organized in a

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national movement under Communist control. Between the revolution and fall of the Communist party in 1991, the trade-union movement in the Soviet Union was mainly an instrument of the state in its drive for higher industrial production.

**In the United States**

*Early Years to the AFL-CIO*

In the United States unionism in some form is almost as old as the nation itself. Crafts that formed local unions in the late 18th and early 19th cent. included printers, carpenters, tailors, and weavers. Their chief purpose was to keep up craft standards and to prevent employers from hiring untrained workers and importing foreign labor. From 1806 there were numerous prosecutions by employers of unions as combinations in restraint of trade. The early 1830s, a period of industrial prosperity and inflation, was a time of union development; however, the financial Panic of 1837 halted this growth. After the Civil War, in 1866, the National Labor Union was formed; it had such objectives as the abolition of convict labor, the establishment of the eight-hour workday, and the restriction of immigration, but it collapsed with its entry into politics in 1872.

Among the most important of the early national organizations was the Knights of Labor (1869–1917), organizing among both skilled and unskilled workers. That policy brought them into conflict with the established craft unions, who joined together to form the American Federation of Labor (AFL; see American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations) in the 1890s under Samuel Gompers. The Knights, thereafter, declined in numbers and effectiveness. The leaders of the AFL opposed the entry of the federation into politics. In 1905 a huge, unwieldy but militant industrial body arose—the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). It concentrated on unskilled workers—lumbermen, migrant workers, and miners. With the conviction of most of its leaders under the Espionage Act during and after World War I, IWW membership shrank, and the organization became ineffective in the 1920s.

During the depression of the 1930s, unions experienced a rapid growth in membership. At this time the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) was formed; it was made up at first of dissident unions of the AFL and was led by John L. Lewis. During the administration of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, steps were taken to restore seriously deteriorated standards of employment and to facilitate the development of trade-union organization. The accomplishment of those goals were sought through the passage of such acts as the National Labor Relations (Wagner) Act of 1935, an enactment that enlarged the rights of unions and created the National Labor Relations Board, and by protective labor legislation such as the Fair Labor Standards Act (1938) and the Social Security Act (1935). There were often severe conflicts between the AFL and the CIO during the 1930s and 40s. It was therefore considered a momentous step when in 1955 the two labor groups merged to form the AFL-CIO. The AFL, the larger of the two organizations, was given a proportionate share of the offices of the new federation, and its president, George Meany, was unanimously elected president of the combined body. Industrial unions of the CIO were given a department of their own within the merged organization.

*The Late 1950s to the Present*

The AFL-CIO issued a series of ethical-practice codes to govern the behavior of union officers and expelled the Teamsters for corruption in 1957. Nevertheless the entire labor movement found itself on the defensive in the late 1950s, following the disclosures made by the Senate Committee on Improper Activities in the Labor or Management Field (popularly known as the McClellan Committee); the committee exposed such abuses as collusion between dishonest employers and union officials,

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extortions and the use of violence by certain segments of labor leadership, and the misuse of funds by high-ranking union officials. As a result of the findings of the McClellan Committee, the Landrum-Griffin Act of 1959 was enacted to correct abuses in labor-management relations.

Since World War II, U.S. unions have undergone a period of decline. In 1960 one third of all American workers belonged to a union, but by 2012 the proportion had dropped to about 11%. Faced with foreign competition and financial troubles in its traditional power base—manufacturing and mining—organized labor was hurt in the 1980s by layoffs and was, in many cases, forced to accept reduced wages and benefits. In response, many unions adopted a more conciliatory attitude, reducing the number of strikes to record lows in the 1980s and early 90s, and attempting to negotiate contracts providing job security for members. Unions have also placed greater emphasis on organizing drives for new members. Although unions have been very successful in organizing government employees, they have been less successful with recruiting office workers in the rapidly expanding services sector. Another problem is demographic: The fastest growing parts of the labor force (women, service industries, and college-educated employees) have traditionally been the most reluctant to organize.

By 1996 the number of strikes in the United States had reached its lowest level in 50 years; at the end of the decade, however, a tighter labor market and more aggressive union leadership led to a resurgence of strikes against such major companies as Northwest Airlines, General Motors, and United Parcel Service. In 2005 disagreements over policy led a number of large unions in the AFL-CIO to leave and form the Change to Win Federation, but by 2010 two of the unions had rejoined the AFL-CIO.

In the early 21st cent., public-sector employees and women made up a larger share (around 50% in both cases) of union members than they had historically, and manufacturing employees had diminished (to roughly one in ten union members) while college graduates had increased (to four in ten). In the early 2010s, public-sector unions, especially at the state level, found themselves under particular pressure after the economic downturn of 2008–9 led to a significant drop in tax revenues. Unlike European union movements, American organized labor has in general avoided the formation of a political party and has remained within the framework of the two-party system.

In the Third World
Organized labor in the Third World, although generally small numerically, has played a disproportionately large role in political developments in those countries. Many union movements in the underdeveloped countries, particularly in Asia and Africa, rising on the wave of nationalism, have led anticolonial movements toward political independence; the leaders of many newly independent nations have owed their rise largely to the support of workers they have organized. In Latin America, too, labor unions are a powerful force, constituting as they do the most important mass political organizations in the nations of that region.

International Organizations
Internationally, world trade unionism was split after 1949 between two rival organizations: the, largely Communist, World Federation of Trade Unions (WTFU), originally set up in 1945, and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), founded in 1949 by member unions that had withdrawn from the WTFU in protest against its Communist domination. The international federations are recognized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organizations (UNESCO), and there is close cooperation between the ICFTU and UNESCO in the field of education. The International
Labor Organization is a specialized agency of the United Nations; some of its aims include raising living standards, improving working conditions, gaining recognition of the right to collective bargaining, and the protection of workers' health.

**Bibliography**


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