

Section 1

Introduction

- *What are unions?*
- *How did unions develop in the United States?*
- *Why are unions important today?*

Pursuing the following study suggestions will be extremely helpful in gaining a better understanding of what unions are, how they developed in this country, what they have done in the past, and what they do today. The study suggestions provide a series of topics around which student and teacher investigation, research, and discussion can be instituted. The study suggestions relate to a number of Wisconsin Model Academic Standards in various academic areas, ranging from social studies to English to the arts.

Generally, students at the elementary and middle levels learn about European guild and apprentice systems. These students often do not apply that knowledge to the study of the growth and development of this nation as an industrial leader. Further, students are seldom asked to use this knowledge to recognize and understand the critical role of the worker and of worker organizations in the development of the United States and the rest of the industrialized world.

MILESTONES OF WISCONSIN LABOR HISTORY

Wisconsin is unique in its history of providing a desirable quality of life for its citizens and for leading the nation in progressive innovations. Our residents are well educated, have a strong commitment to clean water, air, and land, choose honest and dedicated government servants, and maintain strong workplace protections. Wisconsin is a national leader in productivity in both industry and agriculture.

These advances would not have been possible without the political and legislative leadership of labor, and without the sacrifices of many workers who struggled to organize and to develop a solidarity strong enough to bring about change.

Wisconsin was in the vanguard of early union organizing. As early as 1865, Local 125 was formed in Milwaukee as part of the Molders Union, the nation's first modern trade union. The Knights of St. Crispin, founded by Milwaukee shoemakers in 1867, quickly grew to 50,000 members; it was the biggest union in the nation until its demise during the Panic of 1873.

During the nationwide campaign for the eight-hour day in 1886, Milwaukee workers mounted perhaps the most all-encompassing effort of

ordinary citizens in the state. Today's unions are also working more cooperatively than the unions of the past.

Among union members themselves there appears to be greater solidarity and dedication. The history of labor tells us that the struggle is a constant one—often in frustration, but always seeking to move forward to build a better life for the workers of future generations.

—Ken Germanson, *Wisconsin Labor History Society*

The following study suggestions offer students and teachers an opportunity to examine the early struggles of workers to humanize the workplace and earn wages sufficient to support themselves and their dependents. The suggestions are designed to foster an awareness of the hardships and barriers early workers encountered. Inquiry into the study suggestions provides information on, insight into, and appreciation for the history of worker organizations and the concerns and issues that prompted workers to undertake collective action, usually through labor unions, to improve their standard of living and to retain the dignity of the individual worker.

For those who appreciate a traditional approach to instruction, these study suggestions may be used in a series, as they appear, before moving on to the performance tasks in Section Two. For those who employ a conceptual or constructivist approach, beginning with the fourth, fifth, or sixth item might be preferable. Others who wish to focus on Wisconsin history and experience might begin with the third item. Still others may wish to move directly to the performance tasks in Section Two.

Asking students to frame their research around the comparison of working life in 1900 to working life in 2000 is one way to personalize the study. Another strategy is to look at the life of a teenager in 1890, particularly one who worked in a mill, mine, or factory, and contrast it with the life of today's teens. The study could expand to analyze the differences among examples of teen life in 1890, 1925, 1960, and 2000.

To learn how unions work and what they do, students may want to interview union members in their own households, neighborhoods, communities, or schools. Students are urged to locate the local area central labor body or council to investigate what unions do and how they work together toward selected goals or in political action. These American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) related labor councils can make information and materials available to schools that will help students learn about collective bargaining, worker rights, and community service. Labor council members possess a rich, experiential store of local labor history that they are happy to share.

In the following material, six items are identified as possible areas for study. Under each item are listed a limited number of related suggestions for investigation. To be sure, there are many more events and issues that contributed to the growth and development of unions in this country, and those issues also illustrate the incredible impact of early unions on worker life today, as well as the incredible sacrifices made by yesterday's laborers to improve conditions for themselves and for all of us today.

Municipal Employees (AFSCME) was founded in 1936 in Madison. Public workers gained true union rights in the late 1950s, with some public employee unions recognizing that they had to use private industry tactics, such as the strike, to win justice. In Milwaukee, AFSCME District Council 48 almost annually threatened garbage strikes at budget time, prompting city officials there and elsewhere to seek state laws supporting public-sector collective bargaining and a ban on strikes. The result was section 111.70 of the state statutes, which was finally given teeth in 1963. The law set up union election procedures, a prohibited practice process, and fact-finding, all of which gave public employees greater rights and helped spur unionism.

The Wisconsin law was a model for the nation; it was a success in that few crippling strikes occurred yet public employees gained better wages and working conditions. Teacher unions struggled for a while to find their place under the new law, needing, in some cases, to cast off their former leadership by principals and superintendents to become unions in fact, if not in name.

Six successful strikes leading to important improvements in educational practices, salary, and fringe benefits in the School District of Superior demonstrated the effectiveness of collective bargaining in the public sector.

The 1974 Hortonville Teachers' strike, however, demonstrated the chancy results of public employee strikes, particularly in smaller communities. In 1977, following strikes by Madison firefighters and Milwaukee police, the legislature called for binding arbitration of public employee strikes, virtually ending such job actions in the public sector.

Meanwhile, in the private sector, unions continued to thrive into the 1970s, with many unions reaching peak membership by the end of the decade.

The 1980s were a different story. President Reagan's unchallenged firing of Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) air traffic controllers across the country, the growing globalization of the work-force, and the uncompromising attitudes of employers against unions had a negative impact on workers. Wisconsin's onetime industrial might was decimated by plant shutdowns and downsizing as jobs went to so-called right-to-work states or overseas. Because of the fear of strike-breaking, fewer unions favored such job actions, and those that did often faced long, sometimes failed, efforts.

A long Briggs & Stratton strike in Milwaukee in 1983 gave management key footholds in weakening that union, while a Patrick Cudahy strike in the late 1980s involved the added concern of the use of minority workers as strikebreakers.

Labor, however, has been up to the challenge. Though now representing a far lower percentage of the workforce, the union movement during the 1990s has been looking to greater involvement in other coalitions, particularly those representing minority groups and the environmental movement. Unions have become more involved than ever in political and legislative activity, providing a major voice in protecting consumers and

any U.S. community. Workers shut down most industrial plants during the first five days of May, and several thousand were marching toward the Bay View Rolling Mills (the city's largest employer) when the state militia fired into the crowd, killing seven. This incident, along with the Haymarket Incident, which had taken place in Chicago the previous day, may have had the effect of stifling the eight-hour movement for several decades, but it showed how workers acting in solidarity could have an effect upon a community.

Indeed, out of that tragic event came the development of a viable Socialist movement in Milwaukee and the election of progressive leaders who were to have a positive effect on the future of that city.

A 14-week citywide strike in Oshkosh in 1898 by more than 2,000 workers in seven woodworking mills drew national attention when three unionists were arrested for conspiracy. The outcome of this charge was of critical importance. If the arrests were upheld, it would open the way for employers to treat any effort at unionization as a conspiracy against their property rights. Famed attorney Clarence Darrow represented the unionists and won their acquittal after a two-day summation that is still considered one of the greatest statements against worker subjugation ever made.

Workers and unions in Wisconsin saw the need early on for creating councils and federations both within communities and statewide. The several Knights of Labor chapters were supplanted by councils of the American Federation of Labor, with Milwaukee's Federated Trades Council forming in 1887. The Wisconsin State Federation of Labor was formed with a convention in 1893 in Milwaukee, calling for the abolition of child labor, workplace safety and health protections, the eight-hour day, workers' compensation, an end to company stores, and payment of wages in cash, not company script.

With the support of people like University of Wisconsin economist John R. Commons and Progressive Governor Robert M. LaFollette, it was no wonder that in 1911 the state passed the first workers' compensation law and in 1932 passed unemployment compensation. In 1937, the Wisconsin Employment Relations Act was passed, adding critical state support to workers' right to organize.

During the Great Depression (1929—1942), Wisconsin workers joined unions in droves, making Wisconsin one of the most unionized states on a percentage basis; it is a record that continues today.

Wisconsin employers, however, fought back and resisted unionization. Allis-Chalmers used red-baiting tactics to resist the United Automobile Workers (UAW) during an 11-month strike in 1947; J.I. Case in Racine forced the UAW into a 14-month strike just after World War II to halt union security demands; and the Kohler Co. fought off unionization through two multiyear strikes, the second one lasting from 1954 to 1960. Throughout these and other long strikes, Wisconsin workers showed remarkable solidarity, helping to build a union tradition in the state to overcome stiff employer resistance.

It is perhaps that tradition that helped Wisconsin lead the way in public employee unionism. The American Federation of State, County and

UNIONS BUILD A BETTER LIFE: STUDY AREAS

HISTORY OF EARLY WORKER ORGANIZATIONS

Early guilds

First strikes and union organizations in the United States

Formation of the Knights of Labor

UNION DEVELOPMENT

Formation of the American Federation of Labor and early craft unionism

Workers gain right to bargain (Wagner Act)

Formation of Congress of Industrial Organizations; birth of industrial unionism

Merger of AFL-CIO

Unions today

SELECTED WISCONSIN EVENTS IN WORKER HISTORY

Bay View tragedy and the eight-hour day

Oshkosh Woodworkers' Strike; beating back conspiracy charges

Saturday night off; the paper mill strikes

Brewery strikes; Kohier Company actions and worker gains

How UNIONS BUILT A BETTER LIFE

Improved wages

Demanded job safety and health protections

Established shorter hours and a shorter work week

Advocated child labor limitations

Defended worker dignity

Sought expanded benefits including health insurance, paid vacations, retirement plans, sick leave, and family leave provisions

WHAT UNIONS Do

Bargain collectively for wages, hours, and conditions of employment

Protect worker rights and safety

Build better living standards through political action and community services

STATUS OF UNIONS TODAY

Growth or decline; membership, benefits

Implications of Third World development

Worldwide status