

## The Positive Impact of Labor Unions

Labor unions have existed in the United States almost as long as the country itself. The first unions sprouted in the mid-eighteenth century as a result of the western world's transition to industrialized manufacturing, a transition initiated by the English-born Industrial Revolution. Unions didn't truly gain steam in America, however, until after the Civil War. As the mechanized hand of industrial capitalism tightened its grip on American manufacturing, working conditions steadily worsened, motivating frustrated workers to band together and form groups such as the National Labor Union and the Knights of Labor in attempt to fight for the rights of the common workingman.

Twenty years later, in 1886, Samuel Gompers founded perhaps the most significant union in the history of the United States: the American Federation of Labor, or the AFL. The AFL (now known as the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations, or AFL-CIO) still exists today and, in its 130-year history, has never ceased to push for the support of American workers, playing a vital role in improving wages, working conditions, healthcare, and education for all laborers.

"Unions aren't a 'thing of the past.'" writes Donna Brazile in an article for CNN. "They're a vital part of our social fabric and economic future" (Brazile, 2012). And indeed they are. Though labor unions are typically believed to be only working to benefit themselves, they have actually improved the lives of *all* American laborers. Take, for example, the relationship between union membership rates and the income of the middle class- when membership rates increase, the middle class's income increases; when membership rates decrease, the middle class's income decreases (Brazile). Not only this, but unions are also responsible for one of the most important and much-loved facets of American labor: the eight-hour work day. Had union members not

fought tirelessly for this achievement, American workers today would be working over sixty hours a week, able to spend only pathetically short amounts of time in leisure with their families. But this is a relatively small feat compared to the many others union members have fought for and achieved in the past. If it hadn't been for their determined efforts, the life of a laborer in the United States today would be drastically different, and, in some aspects, grossly underdeveloped. Workers wouldn't have proper health insurance, workers wouldn't have any retirement benefits, workers wouldn't have unemployment insurance, there would be no guaranteed minimum wage, workers would have no compensation benefits if they were injured on the job, there would be no standard benefits such as paid sick leaves and vacations, there would be no Family and Medical Leave Act, there would be no Civil Rights Act and, in turn, no ban on job discrimination based on race, religion, or gender, there would be no Occupational Safety and Health Act, and, perhaps most noteworthy of all, there would be no ban on child labor. With all of these triumphs unions and their workers can lay claim to, it is impossible to deny the integral role unions have played and continue to play in the shaping of American labor.

But often overshadowed by these immense achievements is the smaller yet equally important impact unions and their members make on communities large and small across the country every day. For instance, in a time when nearly every product in any retail store seems to be labeled "Made in China" or "Cambodia" or "Taiwan" or "Mexico", union labor continues to produce items in the United States, not only bolstering American labor but also providing consumers with a much higher quality product. Perhaps even more importantly, most communities in the United States couldn't exist without union workers, a fact many people are completely unaware of. Though union membership is declining, many jobs that are essential to a community's well-being still have a large portion made up of union laborers. These include

firefighters, police officers, teachers, factory workers, sanitation workers, construction workers, transportation workers, utilities workers such as engineers and electricians, and telecommunications workers. Each one of these jobs is vital to every community in the United States; without them, and without the union workers willing to perform them, neither the smallest town nor the biggest city would be able to function. Plus, these union jobs, with their typically higher wages than non-union jobs and the generous benefits that they provide, serve as sufficient sources of income and support for the workers and their families.

And I can personally attest to this. Both my mother's father and my father's father were long-time union workers, and my father continues to work in the union today as a technician for AT&T, a job he has held for over twenty-five years. With that job he has received a number of benefits including health insurance, life insurance, and safe working conditions, all of which have given my family both financial success and peace of mind. Moreover, the respectable wage the job has provided has played a vital role in my own life, allowing me to receive a quality education at a Catholic grade school and a public high school and to take part in multiple athletics. And arguably most important of all, it has made it possible for me to attend a four-year university, which is by no means inexpensive. Not only this, but I will also be attending that university with little worry of student debt, something which wouldn't be feasible in large part due to my father's union job, a job that, with its good wages and ample benefits, has allowed us to live comfortably for many years.

But we're not the only ones. Union jobs have allowed millions of Americans- not only union members and their families but non-union citizens, as well- to live in comfort and peace of mind for decades. Whether we realize it or not, the work of union laborers can be seen all around

us, and without it many of us wouldn't be able to live in the comfort we do. And for that, every union member deserves our gratitude.

## Work Cited

Brazile, D. (2012, September 4). *What have unions done for us?* Retrieved April 16, 2016