

The Historical Society of PENNSYLVANIA

LEGACIES

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ORGANIZING *Pennsylvania* WORKERS

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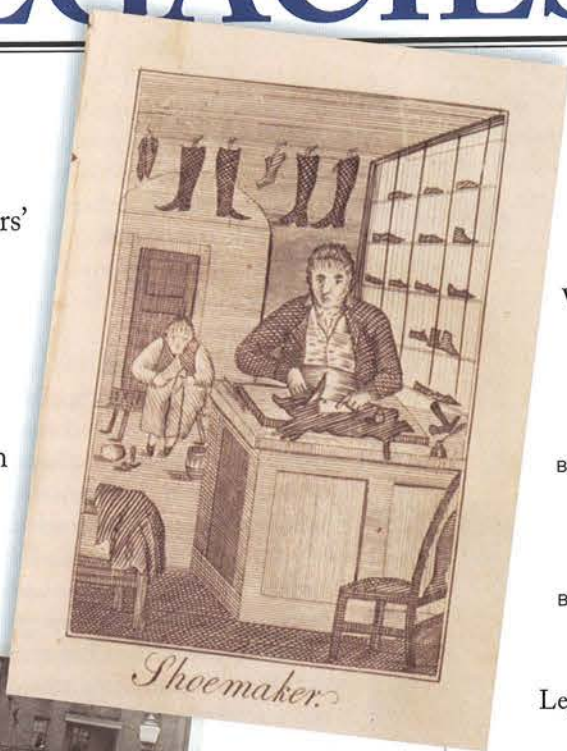
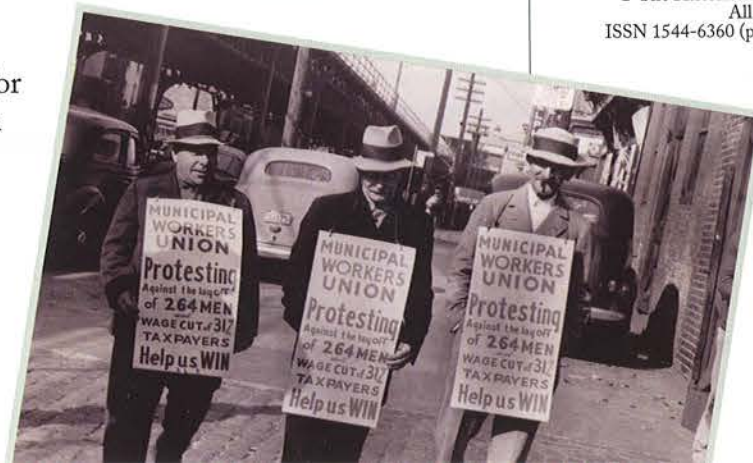
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Virginia Matthews, secretary of the Philadelphia branch of the United Textile Workers, 1934. Philadelphia Record Photograph Collection.

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Labor Today

BY DOROTHY SUE COBBLE AND MICHAEL MERRILL

Is the labor movement a relic from an earlier time, no longer suited to the modern world? Some say yes. When workers faced tyrannical bosses and few options for advancement on their own, the story goes, unions were a necessary evil. But today's well-educated and wired workers can fend for themselves. The declining proportion of the US workforce that is unionized would seem to support this viewpoint. In 1954, 1 out of every 3 American wage earners in the private sector belonged to a union; 60 years later, this number is less than 1 in 10.

We believe this common story of obsolescence and decline is wrong—that it mistakes a small part of the labor movement for the whole and ends up writing an obituary for a movement that in fact is still very much alive.



Members of AFSCME Local 29 in Pittsburgh protest against a lockout, 1985. Courtesy of Walter R. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

Some of the confusion stems from thinking that the small numbers of private sector union members reported in official government statistics represent the whole of the labor movement. True, currently only 6 percent of the nation's private sector workers are covered by a collective bargaining contract. But that

oft-cited figure actually tells us little about the American labor movement. For one, it refers just to unionized workers in the private sector and completely misses the millions of school teachers, bus drivers, firefighters, police officers, nurses, social workers, and other public sector workers who also belong to trade unions—altogether, some 35 percent of all those employed by the federal, state, or municipal government in 2013. Just as important, the official government statistics on union membership—even those that include both public and private sector workers—capture contract unionism only; that is, they track only those organizations recognized under the National Labor Relations Act as the bargaining agents for employees at a given worksite. Rendered invisible in these numbers is the other, “unofficial” labor movement that has always existed alongside official unions.

In the late 19th century, for example, while the Knights of Labor (the largest labor organization) and the American Federation of Labor (its rival) sought and secured agreements with individual employers, the larger labor movement led the “producing classes”—an expansive category encompassing wage earners, small farmers, and business owners as well as the self-employed, unemployed, and unwaged—in nationwide campaigns for social reform. Consider the global upsurge for shorter hours sparked by the AFL's call for a national general strike for the eight-hour day on May 1, 1886, or the agitation for living wage laws by worker organizations and their allies in states and cities across the country in the same era—laws that were consistently voted in and just as consistently overturned by the courts.

In the 20th century, as collective bargaining unionism expanded during the “long New Deal” stretching from the 1930s to the 1970s, new worker associations sprang up as well, sometimes overlapping in goals and strategies with the official labor movement, sometimes not. In the 1970s, 9to5, a national association for office workers, pursued contracts with

individual employers through its union division, but it also launched a nationwide campaign to change how secretaries were treated at work. Through films such as *9 to 5*, starring Dolly Parton, Jane Fonda, and Lily Tomlin, “worst boss contests,” pay equity lawsuits, and an irreverent, attention-grabbing media send-up of National Secretaries Day, the organization won substantial pay raises and new respect and rights for the one-third of American women employed as clericals.

Today, the labor movement continues its efforts to secure union recognition from employers through innovative forms of organizing. At the same time, as it becomes increasingly difficult for workers to gain official recognition and secure a contract with an employer, the unofficial labor movement is in the midst of a revival. Some call this “alt-labor”; others simply speak of the “new mutualism.” Community-based worker centers that offer legal advice, education, and institutional support for political and economic collective advocacy by low-wage workers, especially immigrants, have multiplied rapidly over the last 20 years. While there were 5 such groups in 1992, by 2005 the number had jumped to 140, and by 2012 to 214.

Among the fruits of such efforts are the many living wage ordinances passed by local governments, the hundreds of thousands of marchers who thronged the streets of the nation's cities in May 2006 and again in May 2010 to demand equal rights for immigrants and other excluded workers, and the support for raising the minimum wage in New Jersey and elsewhere during the 2013 fall elections. In addition, freelance writers, taxi drivers, fashion models, domestic workers, retail and restaurant employees, and even car wash attendants—all groups once thought unorganizable—are pressing for recognition and rights and have created new organizations such as the 231,000 strong Freelancers Union, the Taxi Drivers Alliance, the Model Alliance, Domestic Workers United, and the Restaurant Opportunities Centers United. Most have chapters in multiple cities; some have organized themselves into national organizations; and a few operate as part of global unions and networks.

Some of the best and most successful organizing in the United States is thus going on outside of “official” channels, even though much of it is receiving increasing



OUR Walmart demonstration, 2011. Photo courtesy of Marc F. Henning, <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/legalcode>.

support from the official labor movement. The United Food and Commercial Workers, for example, has provided ongoing support to OUR Walmart, a national drive to upgrade conditions at Walmart, where workers earn below-poverty-line wages and routinely turn to food stamps and other government aid. The Service Employees International Union has encouraged the efforts to organize fast-food workers. Construction unions, especially the Laborers' International Union of North America, have supported worker centers and other alliances among immigrant day laborers. The list goes on. These efforts are so widespread and so energetic that the AFL-CIO recently resolved to open its doors to such groups more widely, deciding at its 2013 convention in Los Angeles to affiliate community-based advocacy and membership organizations that share its basic aims and principles.

None of this should be surprising. Buying power and real income for the majority of people have declined over the last half century while the top tier, particularly the

top 1 percent, has seen its wealth skyrocket. Risk has shifted as well; debt for education and training grows while the promise of economic security and upward mobility diminishes. Only those at the very top enjoy "golden parachutes" when they are fired and multi-million-dollar bonuses when their companies declare bankruptcy or face charges of fraud and other illegal activities.

Finally, the upsurge of worker organizing is not limited to the United States. Global trade union membership (excluding China) now stands at 193 million workers worldwide, up from 98 million in 1970—and these figures, of course, leave out the many new noncontract labor organizations around the world that advance worker rights outside collective bargaining structures. Often led by historically marginalized groups—women, immigrants, and racial and ethnic minorities—these new unions are demanding economic and social rights, such as access to credit and education, an end to discrimination, social inclusion, and citizenship rights. They are also at the

forefront of movements for democracy and political reform in South America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.

Worker movements today, in the United States and around the world, are on the rise. Workers have always organized collectively to secure for themselves the rights, recognitions, and rewards that are their due, and they will continue to do so. The 21st century promises to be among the most exciting chapters in the history of labor ever written. ■

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