Labor History Timeline

This labor history timeline was produced by the Labor Education Service at the University of Minnesota.

The timeline is used in trainings we conduct on labor history and other topics. It is designed to be printed on heavy card stock and hung on the wall.

If you would like more information on the timeline exercise – or you would like to contract with the Labor Education Service to conduct a labor history training – please contact our office, 612-624-5020, or e-mail les@umn.edu

Printing Services at the University of Minnesota is able to print this timeline on cardstock for a very affordable price. For more information on printing, contact Printing Services at 612-625-9500.
1492

Europeans Arrive in the Americas

Millions of indigenous people died due to genocide, war, slavery and diseases carried by Europeans. Many nations and tribes resisted, including battles over labor control and slavery.
1600s-1865

Slavery in America

Millions of African people were forcibly removed from the continent, enslaved and transported to the Americas to work on plantations in the South. Many slave rebellions and organizing efforts constituted some of the first labor actions in the Americas.
Ireland’s potato crop failed. Widespread famine caused 500,000 Irish to immigrate to the United States over the next five years.
War broke out between Mexico and the United States after the United States took all or parts of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada and Utah. Mexicans in those areas lost their citizenship rights.
The Minnesota Territory was formed in 1849. At that time, 65 percent of Minnesota residents were immigrants or the children of immigrants. In 1858, Minnesota became the 32nd state.
In 1854, the Daily Minnesota Pioneer carried the first known report of a strike in Minnesota, by journeymen tailors in St. Paul. The outcome is unknown. In 1856, St. Paul printers organized the first union in Minnesota. It eventually became International Typographical Union Local 30.
In the summer of 1860, a slave named Eliza Winston was brought to Minnesota by “her master,” a Mississippi plantation owner. Minnesota abolitionists said state law declared that no person can be held in bondage in Minnesota, even if they are just visiting. Antislavery activists in Minneapolis successfully petitioned a judge to have her freed. Such actions took place across the country as the movement to abolish slavery grew.
Nearly 100 educators come together in Rochester to form the Minnesota Education Association. It was only three years since Minnesota had become a state. These early educators wanted to create a land where every child could receive a quality education.
1865

13th Amendment
Outlaws Slavery

The end to official slavery was perhaps the greatest labor victory in U.S. and Minnesota history. Yet the struggle for equal rights was far from over; the same year that Congress adopted the 13th Amendment, the Ku Klux Klan was formed.
In the aftermath of the Civil War, Congress proposed and the states ratified two very important amendments. The 14th Amendment, adopted in 1868, establishes that African Americans are citizens. It also provides all Americans with due process and equal protection under the law. The 15th Amendment, adopted in 1870, prohibits the federal government and the states from using a citizen’s race, color, or previous status as a slave as a qualification for voting. However, it still excluded all women from voting.
Drawn by economic opportunity and fleeing war and political or religious repression in their homelands, waves of immigrants from all over the globe came to the United States. Mostly working class, they formed the backbone of the American economy but often faced discrimination. Chinese were particularly singled out and were denied citizenship through the Chinese Exclusion Act.
The St. Paul Trades & Labor Assembly was founded with the assistance of the Knights of Labor Assembly, as was the Minneapolis Assembly in 1883 and Duluth’s in 1887. The Knights of Labor were known for their inclusiveness (accepting women and African American members), but they also supported the Chinese Exclusion Act.
The notion of “Employment at Will” started to become the pervasive doctrine in American workplaces and remains so today. The central tenet of this doctrine are that workers have no right to their jobs. Rather, employment is simply viewed as an economic transaction between equal parties that can be terminated by either party for any reason or no reason. Today, the vast majority of American workers who have no union are subject to “employment at will.” Only those with union contracts are protected against discipline, demotion or firing without cause.
The Minnesota Legislature passed its first law limiting child labor in the 1880s, but a comprehensive law fully prohibiting child labor was not passed until 1909. According to the 1890 census report, 4,460 children, between the ages of 10 and 14, were “gainfully employed” in Minnesota.
On May 1 in Chicago, 80,000 workers, many of them immigrants, marched in a parade to demand an eight-hour day. At a rally on May 4, someone threw a bomb into the crowd, killing a number of people. Eight organizers of the Haymarket gathering were put on trial, convicted without evidence and four were executed.
Eva McDonald Valesh, a 22-year-old journalist, began publishing stories on working women in the St. Paul Globe. Her first story, “Among Girls who Toil,” covered the horrible conditions of women working in a Minneapolis garment factory. Within two weeks, the workers went on strike after the firm cut their wages. McDonald Valesh’s reporting helped bring to light the growing problem of sweatshops in industrial America.
With the support of American Federation of Labor President Samuel Gompers, the Minnesota State Federation of Labor was formed, uniting skilled craft unions such as the Building Trades, printers and Machinists. Its platform included the 8-hour day; state inspection of mines and factories; free textbooks for all school children and state ownership of the railroads, telegraph and telephone system.
1890-1895

New South ‘Jim Crow’ Laws

The former Confederate states enacted measures that had the effect of denying blacks the right to vote. Forms of disenfranchisement included poll taxes — requiring payment of a fee to exercise the right to vote — and measures requiring the ownership of property in order to vote. In Texas, these laws were also used to deny Mexican-Americans the right to vote.
Only 29 years old, Sabrie Akin founded the Duluth Labor World newspaper in Duluth, Minnesota. Under her editorial direction, the Labor World championed the cause of “laundry girls” and immigrants working in the ore and logging industries — workers whom others in the labor movement had previously ignored.
In 1905, the Industrial Workers of the World, the most egalitarian labor organization in U.S. history, was formed. Its founders included Mother Jones and Eugene V. Debs and it counted “Big Bill” Haywood and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn among its leaders. The Wobblies, as they are known, built strong representation among Minnesota lumberjacks and led the Mesabi Iron Range strike of 1916.
In the first half of the 20th century, a mass migration of more than 4.8 million African Americans took place from the south to the north. Many left to escape the overt racial discrimination of southern states, only to encounter racial tensions in the north as whites viewed them as a threat to their jobs.
On March 25, 146 garment workers — most of them young, immigrant women — died in the largest industrial disaster in New York City history. Locked inside by factory owners, many jumped to their deaths from the 10-story building.
Ordered by U.S. Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, with the assistance of a young J. Edgar Hoover, federal agents rounded up and arrested some 10,000 suspected "aliens," anarchists, communists and labor activists. Some 556 were eventually deported. The Palmer Raids were the most notorious event in a period that became known as "The Red Scare."
With passage of the 19th Amendment, women finally gain the right to vote. The victory followed decades of agitation by the “suffragettes,” led by Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and many others.
Florence Rood of St. Paul became the first woman president of a national union that included both men and women members. She was the second president of the newly formed American Federation of Teachers. Before taking national office, she wrote a women’s page in the Union Advocate, St. Paul’s labor newspaper, and served as the first woman to preside over the St. Paul Trades and Labor Assembly meetings.
Under this federal law, Native Americans finally gained the right to vote.
In 1924, union members and farmers came together to form their own political party, the Minnesota Farmer Labor Party, on a platform of fair wages for workers and fair prices for farmers. Many lawmakers, including two governors and several members of Congress, were elected under the Farmer Labor banner, making it the most successful third party movement in U.S. history. Its most famous leader was Governor Floyd B. Olson (pictured in the above cartoon). The Farmer Labor Party merged with the Democrats in 1944 to become the DFL.
The decade after the 1929 stock market crash was one of misery and unemployment for millions of Americans. Spurred on by unions and other organizations agitating for change, President Franklin D. Roosevelt put forth an ambitious program, “The New Deal,” that included collective bargaining rights, unemployment insurance and Social Security.
In the 1930s, farmers organized the Farm Holiday Association, which sponsored the only significant farm “strikes” in state history. In Minnesota, the FHA protested low prices by calling for a 10-day shutdown of produce deliveries.
The first sit down strike in American history took place at the Hormel Plant in Austin, Minnesota. Hormel demands that Farmer-Labor Governor Floyd B. Olson call out the National Guard to oust the sit-down strikers, but Olson instead mediates an agreement.
The most significant single labor struggle in state history was a showdown between Minneapolis employers and workers that divided the city and forced Farmer-Labor Governor Floyd B. Olson, to step in. The strikers used a new tactic — roving pickets — and published their own daily newspaper to counter the corporate-dominated press. They enlisted the support of farmers and the community as they ultimately broke the back of the fiercely anti-labor Citizens Alliance. The victory came at the cost of four lives — two strikers and two strikebreakers.
The Minneapolis Teamsters’ strike, the San Francisco general strike and the Toledo Auto-Lite strike spur Congressional passage of the National Labor Relations Act, also known as the “Wagner Act.” The NLRA is the law guaranteeing workplace rights for most people employed in the private sector. This landmark legislation declared that it is the policy of the United States to encourage “the practice and procedure of collective bargaining.”
Members of the United Auto Workers took over General Motors factories in Flint, Michigan, in the struggle that eventually led to the organization of the entire U.S. auto industry. They utilized the sit-down strategy that had been pioneered by Hormel workers in Minnesota. Genora Johnson, wife of a local union leader, organized a UAW Women’s Emergency Brigade. Members wore red berets and carried hammers, crowbars and two-by-fours to demonstrations and pickets.
The Minnesota Legislature passed a Minnesota Labor Relations Act patterned after the National Labor Relations Act. It covers workers at small, private sector employers exempted from the federal legislation. By 1940, unionized workers in Minnesota represented nearly 25 percent of the state’s non-agricultural workforce.
While women have always performed the majority of unpaid labor — and many had worked for wages for years — women’s presence in the workforce really grew during World War II, when they filled jobs in the wartime industries and many other positions. The iconic poster of “Rosie the Riveter” captured their skillfullness and determination.
1942-1964

‘Bracero Program’

Millions of contract workers from Mexico, Jamaica, British Honduras and Barbados were brought to the United States to meet labor shortages created by World War II. Although the program ended decades ago, some of these “guest workers” are still fighting for wages owed to them.
Labor and civil rights leader Nellie Stone Johnson was elected to the Minneapolis Library Board, becoming the first African American to hold city-wide office in Minnesota. One of her first jobs was at the exclusive (all white, all male) Minneapolis Athletic Club. When management decided to cut employees' wages, Nellie organized with her co-workers. She went on to become the first woman vice president of the Minneapolis Hotel Employees & Restaurant Employees and served on a national contract negotiations committee which addressed pay equity.
1946

‘Strike for Better Schools’

St Paul teachers engaged in the first organized teachers’ strike in the nation, winning improved conditions for themselves and their students. Segregated into female and male teachers’ unions, the women led the strike, setting strategy, coordinating community support and serving as spokespeople with the media.
After the largest strike wave in U.S. history occurred in 1946, Congress passed the Taft-Hartley Act to limit the power of workers. This legislation prohibits sympathy strikes and secondary boycotts and restricts many of the most effective tactics of unions.
The three decades after World War II saw the emergence of many movements in American society for equal rights, most notably the civil rights movement, feminism and organizing among people with disabilities, American Indians and the gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender community. One milestone for these movements was passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.
Congress passed the Landrum-Griffin Act to prevent union racketeering along with further limiting picketing rights and completely outlawing secondary boycotts.
1962

United Farm Workers

Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta co-founded the United Farm Workers Union to improve conditions for migrant workers, who are excluded from the protections of the National Labor Relations Act and many other federal labor laws. Using nonviolent tactics, they organized a successful boycott of California table grapes and lobbied for the Agricultural Labor Relations Act, the first law of its kind to grant farm workers the right to collectively organize and bargain for better wages and conditions.
President John F. Kennedy signed Executive Order 10988, allowing federal employees to collectively bargain, although it remains illegal for them to strike.
Due in large part to pressure from the women’s movement, Congress passed the Equal Pay Act. The law makes it illegal to pay women less than men for doing the same job. Yet systemic discrimination continues. Women earn an average of 77 cents for every dollar a man earns, in part because traditionally female occupations still pay less than male-dominated jobs and women are penalized if they drop out of the workforce to raise families.
In February, African-American sanitation workers in Memphis, represented by AFSCME, struck for better wages and safety on the job, winning major contract gains. The strike escalated into one of the climatic struggles of the 1960’s and initiated a wave of public employee union organizing in other parts of the south. The strike’s most influential supporter, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., was assassinated on April 4 as he was leaving his hotel room to address the striking workers.
More than 200,000 Postal Service workers in 15 states, including Minnesota, engaged in a wildcat strike to force Congress to raise wages. It was the first major strike by federal employees, for whom striking is illegal and a felony, and eventually led to formal collective bargaining for postal employees.
The 1970s proved to be a decade of progress for workers legislatively. The Minnesota Legislature passed a host of measures, including a state minimum wage law and occupational safety and health act. The national OSHA legislation passed in 1970 — nearly a century after unions began organizing for such protection. Laws such as OSHA are particularly important in non-union workplaces, where workers face retaliation if they speak out. The legislative agenda of the 1970s illustrates how the labor movement works on behalf of all workers.
A landmark strike by Minneapolis teachers helped spur passage in 1971 of the Public Employment Labor Relations Act, commonly known as PELRA. It granted collective bargaining rights to public employees in Minnesota, including workers in school districts and in state, county and local governments. The law was amended in 1973 to provide a limited right to strike.
Eight women in a small Minnesota town initiated the first bank strike in American history, seeking fair treatment in pay and promotions. Though they failed to gain union recognition and most lost their jobs, their walkout was a milestone in the history of women’s and workers’ rights.
The newly-elected administration of President Ronald Reagan signaled its hostile intent to organized labor when he fired thousands of striking members of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization. Minnesotans joined more than 400,000 union members in labor’s first Solidarity Day demonstration in Washington, D.C., to protest Reagan administration policies and the firings.
Members of AFSCME, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, engaged in the first strike by state government employees in Minnesota history.
Minnesota became the first state in the nation to implement pay equity, also referred to as equal pay for work of comparable worth, for all local and state government jobs. It led to higher pay for many female government workers.
Some 6,000 members of the Minnesota Nurses Association went on strike against 15 hospitals to protest low wages and unfavorable working conditions. The nurses won their strike and brought national attention to the issues facing workers in health care and women workers in particular.
Workers at the Hormel meatpacking plant in Austin, Minnesota, walked off the job in an effort to maintain wage standards and safe working conditions in the industry. The strike, which lasted many months, pitted Hormel workers against both their company and their international union.
Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act, which established sanctions against employers who violated immigration laws. The Act made it illegal for an employer to knowingly hire undocumented workers.
Twelve Hmong immigrant workers were among the 28 members of IUE Local 1140 who struck Quality Tool, Inc., in St. Paul. They were among the first members of the city’s Hmong community — now one of the largest in the nation — to become active in organized labor.
After years of organizing by unions and disability rights activists, Congress passed the Americans with Disabilities Act, prohibiting discrimination in the workplace and elsewhere against people with disabilities.
1993

Family and Medical Leave Act

Congress passed FMLA, the Family and Medical Leave Act, which allows workers up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave — without fear of losing their job — to deal with serious illness or to care for a child or spouse with serious illness. The United States remains one of only a handful of countries without guaranteed, paid maternity leave.
Thousands of Minnesota Teamsters were among 180,000 nationwide who launched a successful, 15-day strike at United Parcel Service over the company’s effort to replace full-time jobs with part-time positions. It was the largest strike in the United States in 20 years.
Lois Jensen and her colleagues won the first class action sexual harassment lawsuit in American history. The $3.5 million settlement addressed the brutal harassment faced by women working in the Eveleth iron mines in Northern Minnesota. Lois’ story is the basis for the movie “North Country.”
After the Holiday Inn Express in downtown Minneapolis called in immigration authorities to intimidate workers who were trying to organize with the Hotel Employees & Restaurant Employees, the union went to bat for them. HERE successfully fought the deportation of eight undocumented workers and ultimately convinced the AFL-CIO to change its policy and champion the rights of immigrant workers.
Nearly 30,000 employees, members of AFSCME and MAPE, the Minnesota Association of Professional Employees, engaged in a two-week strike for a fair contract with the state of Minnesota.
University of Minnesota clericals, members of AFSCME, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, took part in the first walkout at the university in 50 years. Students, faculty and the community played a key role in the success of the strike.
More than 2,000 members of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1005 went on strike in the Twin Cities, shutting down Metro Transit bus service. As in many struggles, health care costs were a key issue.
2005

AFL-CIO Splits; Change to Win Forms

The SEIU, Teamsters, UNITE-HERE, UFCW, Laborers and Carpenters split from the national AFL-CIO to form their own federation, Change to Win. Debates continue over why the split occurred and what’s best for the labor movement. This was not the first time such a split has occurred within labor; from 1937-1955, the AFL and CIO were separate, competing labor federations.
On December 12, hundreds of ICE agents arrived in Worthington to raid the unionized Swift and Co. pork processing plant. The Swift raids were one of the largest workplace immigration actions in U.S. history. More than 230 people were arrested in Worthington, tearing the entire community apart. United Food & Commercial Workers Local 1161, the union at Swift, stepped up to help the workers and their families.
2006

Immigrants and Allies in the Streets

More than 40,000 people marched in St. Paul for immigrant rights, the largest rally in the history of Minnesota.
Twin Cities private security officers represented by SEIU Local 26 engaged in civil disobedience, an unlikely tactic of this group of workers, winning union recognition and major improvements in wages, health care and job safety.
Minnesota nurses staged the largest nurses’ strike in U.S. history and garnered widespread community support in their demands for safe staffing levels.
The U.S. Supreme Court’s landmark “Citizens United” decision opens the floodgates to massive corporate spending in politics. The decision also allows contributors to remain anonymous, denying citizens the right to know who is influencing elections and lawmaking.
Hundreds of thousands of people demonstrated at the state Capitol in Madison, Wisconsin, and hundreds more occupied the building for weeks after Governor Scott Walker pushed through draconian measures to eliminate collective bargaining for public workers. The protests drew attention to the growing attacks on worker rights and the increasing power of big money in politics.
Young people spawn a national movement — and change the terms of the debate — when they occupy a park near Wall Street to protest the bailout of the big banks. Their slogan, “We Are the 99%” calls attention to growing economic and social inequality in the United States.