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

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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.
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.
1848 Mexican American War

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.
Women have always done the majority of the world’s work in fields, factories and the home - often without pay. The first manufacturing workers in the United States were children, followed by women, because they were perceived to be fit for “tedious” work and would be less likely to take action against employers. By 1850, 24 percent of U.S. manufacturing workers were women. Large numbers also were employed in domestic service and teaching. Women workers have steadily increased as a proportion of the paid workforce. By 2012, women made up 47 percent of the American workforce, with the largest numbers employed in education and health care.
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.
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.
1868

14TH AND 15TH AMENDMENTS

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.
1880s

‘Employment at Will’

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.
1886

Haymarket Protest

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.
1887

The Brotherhood of Painters and Decorators of America

Thirteen tradesmen formed The Brotherhood of Painters and Decorators of America in Baltimore, MD, and within a year, the union grew to more than 7,000 members in over 100 locals. The Brotherhood worked to set fair standards for pay and benefits and to build community among those who it represented. Eventually, the Brotherhood became the modern union, IUPAT, The International Union of Painters and Allied Trades.
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.
In 1888, the average retail employee earned $10 per week for 86 hours of work while receiving no holidays, no sick pay, no pensions and no insurance.

The Retail Clerks International Union, then known as the Retail Clerks National Protective Union, was chartered by the American Federation of Labor in 1890. At the point it was chartered, the union was made up only of workers from the Clothing and Gents Furnishings and Shoe Store in Muskegon, Michigan.

Two years later, the RCNPU chartered with seven locals, and its membership spread throughout the Midwest, including stores in Indiana, Minnesota, Colorado, Ohio and Illinois. By 1899, the union officially became an international when a local was chartered in British Columbia, Canada.
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.
When millionaire Andrew Carnegie and Chairman Henry Frick demanded massive concessions from workers at the Carnegie Steel Co. near Pittsburgh, the union fought back with the help of the community. Members of the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers battled hired Pinkerton guards on the banks of the Monongahela River. Seven workers and three Pinkertons were killed. National Guard troops were brought in to suppress the strike. Recognizing the significance of the struggle, the St. Paul Trades & Labor Assembly raised money for the strikers and sent famous Twin Cities criminal lawyer W.W. Erwin to Pittsburgh to assist in their defense. Homestead proved to be a crushing defeat — with the result that there would be no recognized trade unionism and collective bargaining in steel and other heavy industries until the 1930s.
The Pullman Strike was an early and major defeat for American workers. It began in the company-owned town of Pullman, near Chicago. Workers who made Pullman sleeping cars began a wildcat strike to protest cuts in their wages. They sought the support of Eugene V. Debs’ American Railway Union, fresh from its success in challenging the Great Northern Railroad. Debs and the ARU shut down rail traffic in 27 states in sympathy with the strikers, but the effort was crushed by the federal courts and federal troops.
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.
The Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America was chartered by the American Federation of Labor in 1897 with seven locals; five of them composed of mostly skilled retail workers. In most meat packing plants, unskilled workers were the majority. Of this majority, 60 percent earned less than $6 a week. Skilled workers were paid better, with their wages ranging from $3 to $3.50 a day. In 1903, the union demanded that the wages of the skilled workers be raised by 10 percent. The following year, the union asked that the wage increase be extended to both skilled and unskilled workers. After this demand, the companies’ response was to reduce hourly rates for all workers. In 1904, the union organized a nationwide strike with 50,000 members participating. The strike ended in defeat, with a severe decline in membership as well as a long list of strikers being permanently blacklisted.
Mary Harris “Mother” Jones led a protest march of mill children - many of whom were victims of industrial accidents - from Philadelphia to New York. They demanded the right to go to school. Mother Jones spent much of her long life organizing workers and became known as “The Most Dangerous Woman in America.” She was a powerful speaker, urging her audiences to “Pray for the dead and fight like hell for the living” and “Whatever your fight, don’t be ladylike!”
Union Roofers and Waterproofers work on a variety of types of buildings, protecting facilities against water intrusion and ultimate damage to the structure and contents. Workers formed their first union, The International Slate and Tile Roofers Union of America, in 1903 – and a second, The International Brotherhood of Composition Roofers, Damp and Waterproof Workers, in 1906. The two functioned cooperatively for several years, merging in 1919. Construction blossomed after World War II, with steady growth marking the 1950s. By 1978, the union had 28,000 members. It was during that year the union adopted its current name, the United Union of Roofers, Waterproofers and Allied Workers. Today, it has 22,000 members participating in nine regional district councils across the country. Roofers & Waterproofers Union Local 96 represents workers in Minnesota, western Wisconsin and North and South Dakota. It operates an Apprenticeship Training Facility in Blaine.
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.
The Great Migration

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.
Construction unions formed the Building and Construction Trades Department within the AFL-CIO to coordinate their efforts around organizing, safety and improved wages and working conditions, as well as to resolve jurisdictional disputes. Branches also were established at the state and local levels. The peak period for the Building Trades was 1940 to 1960, when more than half of all construction workers in the United States were unionized. Today, it stands at less than 20 percent. The Building Trades continue to promote policies and practices, such as apprenticeship, to maintain a skilled membership. And they oppose legislation that undermines wages and benefits for construction workers.
Female shirtwaist* workers in New York went on strike against sweatshop conditions in what became known as “The Uprising of the 20,000.” They were led by Clara Lemlich, a 23-year-old Ukrainian immigrant who had become a union activist while still in her teens. When the male leaders of the workers resisted taking action, she took the floor and called for a general strike. The walkout resulted in improved wages and working conditions at several factories, but not at Triangle Shirtwaist, where a disastrous fire would take place in 1911. Lemlich was active for many years in the International Ladies Garment Workers Union.

* Shirtwaists were a popular fashion item at the turn of the 20th century. They were button-down blouses that resembled a man’s shirt.
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.
Lawrence, Massachusetts, textile workers launched an explosive eight-week strike that popularized the slogan “Bread and Roses” - dignity and improved conditions as well as higher wages. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and other IWW organizers help lead the multi-ethnic walkout by 23,000 women, men and children, many of them immigrants. This epic strike inspired many subsequent struggles and the writing of the song, “Bread and Roses,” with lyrics such as “Yes, it is bread we fight for, but we fight for roses, too.”
The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers was organized nationally on November 28, 1891. In Minnesota, records indicate that electrical workers began meeting in February of 1910. Two years later, there were 103 people meeting weekly. Local 110 was chartered as a local of the IBEW on July 29, 1912.

At that time, a typical journeyman electrician earned about $47 a month. In 1914, the City of St. Paul passed an ordinance requiring all electricians operating in the city to be licensed. Membership in Local 110 grew to about 180.
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 Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters was the first labor organization led by African Americans to receive a charter from the American Federation of Labor. Porters performed essential passenger services on the railroads’ Pullman sleeper cars. The union’s founder and first president was A. Philip Randolph, who became a leader in the civil rights movement. The union played a key role in promoting the rights of African Americans before it folded with the decline of passenger rail travel.
International Union of Operating Engineers Local 49 represents 13,000 men and women in Minnesota and North and South Dakota working for highway/heavy and building contractors, well drillers, equipment repair shops, welding shops, sand and gravel suppliers, counties, municipalities, hospitals, school districts, cemeteries and more. Local 49 was chartered on June 10, 1927, following the amalgamation of three smaller unions. In 2015, IOUE Local 35 merged with Local 49, bringing in employees of the Metropolitan Sewage District. Local 49 is one of the largest Building Trades unions in the region. The union is a strong advocate for investment in improving and maintaining our infrastructure. Local 49 maintains a state-of-the-art training center in Hinckley.
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.
Stephen R. Blair, born in 1917 in Swanville, Minnesota, attended Duluth Central High School and the University of Minnesota-Duluth before enlisting in the U.S. Army. While serving as a field paramedic, he was discharged on “suspicion of homosexuality.” He then moved to San Francisco, where he joined the National Union of Marine Cooks and Stewards and was an activist and possibly an officer, according to some accounts. Blair’s partner was Frank McCormick, an officer in the union and a member of the Executive Board of the California Congress of Industrial Organizations. The National Union of Marine Cooks and Stewards was a small union known for full integration of African American and gay members. It represented workers on cruise lines and freighters. In the 1950s, the union’s leaders were blacklisted and the union was expelled from the CIO for having Communist leadership. Blair went on to a career in advertising and performing in theater. In 1992, he was one of five Seattle residents who performed their own life stories in the production, *Hidden History: True Stories from Seattle’s Gay and Lesbian Elders*. Blair died in 1997.
In 1931, during the depths of the Great Depression, Congress passed the Davis-Bacon Act, known as the federal prevailing wage law. Authored by two Republican lawmakers, it requires that construction workers on federally-funded projects be paid the wages and benefits found by the Department of Labor to be “prevailing” for similar work in the area where the construction project is being done. The goal is to stop unfair bidding practices and prevent local communities from being undermined by outside contractors bringing in low-paid workers. Studies have shown that prevailing wage laws provide an important floor under wages, promote safer workplaces and offer an economic benefit to local communities.
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 largely female workforce of the Strutwear Knitting Works in downtown Minneapolis went on strike after eight workers were fired for trying to form a union. Strikers walked the picketline for eight months, enduring the economic hardship of the Great Depression. The Strutwear workers received support from many other unions, including Minneapolis General Drivers 574, who had conducted a historic series of walkouts in 1934 that paved the way to Minneapolis becoming “a union town.” The Farm Holiday Association sent in truckloads of food for the strikers. In April of 1936, the Strutwear company agreed to most of the workers’ demands.
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.”
Project Labor Agreements have been in use since they were first authorized under the National Labor Relations Act of 1935. PLAs are pre-hire collective bargaining agreements between unions and contractors for a specific construction project. Typically, they mean no strikes or lockouts for the duration of the contract. The use of Project Labor Agreements can provide structure and stability to large construction projects. PLAs also help ensure compliance with laws and regulations governing workplace safety and health, equal employment opportunity and labor and employment standards. The U.S. Department of Labor says PLAs result in “high quality work on projects done on time, on budget and good job and training opportunities that strengthen our communities.” The use of PLAs has increased in Minnesota and other states in recent decades.
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.
For much of human history, skills have been transferred from one generation to another through some form of apprenticeship. In the colonial United States, apprentices were often indentured servants assigned to “masters.” Today’s system of apprenticeship, which combines on-the-job training with instruction, began in the early 20th century. In 1937, Congress passed the National Apprenticeship Act, also known as the Fitzgerald Act, to promote apprenticeship and set standards. In Minnesota, the Apprenticeship Advisory Council held its first meeting in 1939. Since that time, the state has registered more than 110,000 apprentices, many in the Building Trades.
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.
‘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.
An epic two-year strike against the Morrell Company, which ended in 1937 with a union victory, helped strengthen packinghouse workers. Later that year, the Congress of Industrial Organizations formed the Packinghouse Workers Organizing Committee (PWOC). PWOC organized African American and white workers together and fought against all forms of discrimination.

In 1943, the PWOC was dissolved to form the United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA). By 1953, the two unions had agreed to coordinate collective bargaining with national meat packing companies.

Some of the stories detailing how the black and white meatpacking workers came together are included in the book *Meatpackers: An Oral History of Black Packinghouse Workers & Their Struggle for Racial & Economic Equality.*
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.
Rivals since the CIO was formed in the 1930s, the AFL and CIO voted in 1955 to merge to create one national labor federation in the United States. Plumber George Meany, leader of the AFL, became AFL-CIO president. United Auto Workers President Walter Reuther, who led the CIO, became head of the federation’s Industrial Union Department. A year later, the merger occurred at the state level in Minnesota. Robert Olson, a Duluth Motion Picture Operator, was elected president of the Minnesota AFL-CIO. Robert Hess, a leader of the Gas, Coke & Chemical Workers union at 3M, was elected vice president.
Congress passed the Landrum-Griffin Act to prevent union racketeering along with further limiting picketing rights and completely outlawing secondary boycotts.
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.
1962

Federal Employees Win Collective Bargaining

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.
Bayard Rustin is best remembered as the organizer of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, one of the largest nonviolent protests ever held in the United States. While the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., made headlines with his “I Have A Dream” speech, it was Rustin who made the massive event happen by organizing busloads of demonstrators from every corner of the United States. An associate of A. Philip Randolph, the founder of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, Rustin worked closely with the labor movement but never achieved leadership positions in part because he was openly gay. Instead, he was active behind the scenes, influencing many. “We are all one - and if we don’t know it, we will learn it the hard way,” Rustin said.
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.
On June 28, 1969, customers at the Stonewall Inn, a popular LGBT bar in Greenwich Village, took a stand against harassment by police. At the time, New York had many anti-LGBT laws and LGBT establishments were regularly raided and shut down. The protest, which led to demonstrations across the city, is largely regarded as the catalyst for the LGBT movement for civil rights in the United States. The rebellion spurred the creation of advocacy groups such as the Gay Liberation Front and STAR. On the first anniversary of Stonewall, the first pride parades in U.S. history took place in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago and New York. Within two years, LGBT rights groups had been started in nearly every major U.S. city. In the wake of Stonewall, unions such as the American Federation of Teachers issued statements of support for gay rights.
In May of 1969, the Committee for Homosexual Freedom picketed the Tower Records store in San Francisco for firing a worker because he was gay. The company eventually rehired the worker, but refused to pledge that it would not discriminate against gays. Workers then formed a union, The Brotherhood of Tower, to pressure the employer to stop discriminating. It was one of many such actions in workplaces as LGBTQ workers organized for laws protecting their rights. The first local ordinances were enacted in 1972 in Ann Arbor and East Lansing, Michigan, to be followed in subsequent years by laws passed in a number of states. In 1993, Minnesota passed legislation protecting sexual orientation and gender identity in all employment. But there is still no federal statute explicitly addressing employment discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity.
1970

The Great Postal Strike

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.
Following the 1969 Stonewall Rebellion, trans sex workers Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson founded Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR). They saw that the needs of street youth and trans youth were not being taken into account by other early LGBT power groups and opened a shelter and social space in New York City. STAR House had many firsts. It was the first LGBT youth shelter in North America, the first U.S. organization led by trans women of color and the first labor organization for trans sex workers. STAR later expanded to other cities, before eventually collapsing in the mid-1970s.
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. Minnesota has one of the most progressive laws in the country governing worker rights in the public sector.
Crystal Lee Jordan was fired for trying to organize a union at the J.P. Stevens textile plant in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina. Her story was made into the 1979 Hollywood film, “Norma Rae,” starring Sally Field, that portrays the struggles involved in organizing and raised the profile of unions in the United States. Before she was fired, Jordan took one final stand, which became the key moment in the film: “I took a piece of cardboard and wrote the word UNION on it in big letters, got up on my work table, and slowly turned it around. The workers started cutting their machines off and giving me the victory sign. All of a sudden the plant was very quiet...”
Minnesota passed its Prevailing Wage Act, also known as a “Little Davis-Bacon” law, more than 40 years after the federal government enacted its legislation. The state was the last to embrace the prevailing wage concept. The law requires that construction workers on state-funded projects be paid the wages and benefits found by the state Department of Labor & Industry to be “prevailing” for similar work in the area where the construction project is being done. Numerous projects that have received state funds, from sports stadiums to schools, have been governed by the prevailing wage. Kansas was the first state to institute the practice, in 1891. By the late 1970s, 42 states and the District of Columbia had adopted a prevailing wage law. Some states, under pressure from anti-union forces, have since repealed their laws.
1977

The Willmar 8

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.
Hourly wages for the vast majority of American workers have either stagnated or dropped since 1979, with the exception of a period of strong across-the-board wage growth in the late 1990s. Workers of color, particularly African-Americans and Latinos, have faced greater wage stagnation than white workers. Researchers have found a correlation between the decline of unions and lower wages — and between lower wages and a growth in economic and social inequality.
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.
1981

State Workers Go On Strike

Members of AFSCME, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, engaged in the first strike by state government employees in Minnesota history.
In 1982, the Village Voice newspaper in New York City became the first private company to offer domestic partnership benefits. It came as the result of contract negotiations by the publishing local of District 65 of the United Auto Workers. The UAW successfully bargained the extension of health insurance, life insurance and disability benefits to “spousal equivalents” of union members, regardless of gender.

Today, many states, counties and local municipalities, as well as hundreds of private companies, organizations, colleges and universities offer domestic partnership benefits. In the early 2000s, Minnesota state employee unions negotiated domestic partner benefits in their contracts, only to see the provision removed by legislators. Some municipalities, such as Minneapolis, do provide domestic partner benefits to their employees. In Minnesota, the movement for domestic partner benefits has slowed since 2013, when Governor Mark Dayton signed legislation legalizing same-sex marriage in the state.
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.
The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) is an international direct action advocacy group working to bring about legislation, medical research, treatment and policies to ultimately bring an end to HIV and AIDS. Members have engaged in rallies and civil disobedience to challenge discrimination against those with AIDS and lack of action by public officials and agencies. Their work helped create a foundation for the rights protecting LGBTQ people today. Formed in 1987, ACT UP continues to call attention to the HIV and AIDS crisis.
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.
Boise Cascade of International Falls began a major expansion of its pulp and paper mill in International Falls using BE&K, a nonunion firm, as its general contractor. BE&K built the mill on an “open shop” basis, sparking riots at a camp set up for the out-of-state, non-union workers and fierce resistance by Building Trades unions. In one of the largest demonstrations ever held in Minnesota, several thousand people gathered at the state Capitol in St. Paul to protest. Boise did not relent and the BE&K struggle is remembered as part of a pattern of union-busting in the 1980s that began with President Reagan’s firing of striking air traffic controllers.
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.
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.
The United States, Canada and Mexico entered into the North American Free Trade Agreement on January 1, 1994. NAFTA was touted as a measure which would, among other things, raise living standards in all countries, increase democracy in Mexico and create 200,000 U.S. jobs per year. None of those things happened. NAFTA was a wake-up call for American workers. Labor, environmental, farm, faith and community organizations joined in coalition to oppose the free trade deal. Today, the Minnesota Fair Trade Coalition, formed in 1992, is the oldest continuously operating, statewide fair trade coalition in the United States.
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.
Recognizing that their union is changing as increasing numbers of women take on work that was traditionally gendered male, the International Brotherhood of Painters and Allied Trades (formerly the Brotherhood of Painters and Decorators of America) changed their name to the International Union of Painters and Allied Trades (IUPAT).
Thousands of people from around the world converged on Seattle to protest at the first World Trade Organization summit held on U.S. soil. Citizens had no access to the behind-closed-doors trade talks that directly affected their lives. Hundreds of Minnesota union members were among the participants in massive, weeklong demonstrations that led the WTO to adjourn without making a deal. Dubbed “The Battle in Seattle,” the WTO marked a turning point for the U.S. labor movement’s involvement in challenging the corporate global agenda.
The dawn of the new millenium brought the growth of many new forms of worker organizing. They included greater activism among Walmart and other retail workers and walkouts by fast food workers. Worker centers such as Minneapolis-based CTUL (Centro de Trabajadores Unidos en Lucha/Center of Workers United in Struggle) grew as places where workers could come together to improve their lives. Many of the new worker movements built ties with labor unions and community organizations.
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.
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.
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.
2008

Smithfield Workers Join the UFCW

After 16 years of organizing at the Smithfield Packing Plant in Tar Heel, North Carolina, workers finally succeeded and joined the UFCW.

Despite years of intimidation, violence, and illegal firings by the company’s management, African American, Latino, Native American and white workers stuck together.

The new local union was chartered as UFCW Local 1208, since the union was won in December of 2008. Today, there is a step team organized by young black workers at the plant and a mural of civil rights leaders on the wall of the union hall.
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.
American Crystal Sugar, a farmer-owned cooperative that produces sugar from beets, locked out 1,300 workers on Aug. 1, 2011, after members of the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers International Union refused to accept contract concessions. The lockout stretched on for 20 months, affecting communities in Minnesota, North Dakota and Iowa — particularly in the Red River Valley. Crystal Sugar kept its operations going with scab labor while union workers turned to other jobs and unemployment assistance. When the lockout finally ended in April 2013, it was clear that what had once been a close relationship between sugar workers and beet farmers, who had worked together for years to promote fair trade policies, would never be the same.
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.
#BlackLivesMatter was formed in 2012 after the murder in Florida of a young African-American man, Trayvon Martin, whose killer was acquitted. The movement has grown as protests have mounted against other killings, including that of Michael Brown in Missouri in 2014 and Jamal Clark in Minneapolis in 2015. #BlackLivesMatter has broadened the conversation around race and the legacy of slavery. In several communities, labor unions have built ties with #BlackLivesMatter chapters to address chronic issues of dehumanization, inequality and exploitation.
Taking a Stand for Rights

The labor movement and its allies stopped Right to Work at the state Legislature and defeated constitutional amendments on the November ballot to restrict marriage and voting rights. So-called Right to Work laws limit the power of workers to unite through their unions. Similarly, the proposed constitutional amendment on voting rights would have put up barriers to participation by many Minnesotans. When a broad-cased coalition that included unions successfully rejected the amendment to define marriage in the state Constitution, Minnesota made history by becoming the first state in the nation to stop such a measure. Less than a year later, the Legislature legalized same-sex marriage.
In the largest union election in Minnesota history, 26,000 home health care workers voted to join SEIU Healthcare Minnesota. To gain the right to organize, the workers mobilized to push the Legislature to change state law. They endured court challenges bankrolled by the National Right to Work Committee. Workers knocked on hundreds of doors and engaged in thousands of conversations to gain support for the union. Key issues in the organizing were better pay and benefits for home care workers, more access to training and improved quality of care for their clients.
The Minnesota Legislature passed the Women’s Economic Security Act to improve the lives of working women. WESA incorporates several measures, including a requirement that state contractors pay women and men equally for performing similar jobs. It also sets a 12-week minimum in Minnesota for pregnancy leave, although employers do not have to pay workers during that leave.

In addition, lawmakers raised the state’s minimum wage for the first time in nine years, to $9.50 an hour.
Workers who clean Target stores won a huge victory when they successfully pressured the giant retailer to adopt a code of conduct for its subcontractors, guaranteeing decent wages, working conditions and the right to unionize. Workers said the agreement could become a model for improving conditions throughout the industry.
Workers at Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport got a voice on the facility’s governing body, the Metropolitan Airports Commission, when Governor Mark Dayton appointed Ibrahim Mohamed, a cart driver at MSP, and Dixie Hoard, a former flight attendant. Their presence on the MAC was a symbol of the growing power of workers who mounted successful campaigns for an airport minimum wage, paid sick and safe time and the right to have a union. Many airport jobs were once well-paid, unionized positions, but became minimum wage through subcontracting and union-busting.
Following a three-year campaign by MAPE, the Minnesota Association of Professional Employees, the State of Minnesota rolled out new rules designed to prevent bullying on the job for the state’s nearly 40,000 employees. The Respectful Workplace Policy outlines steps that both employer and employee can take to address the problem. Minnesota is a national leader in recognizing the importance of healthy and respectful classrooms and work environments, and is one of only a handful of states to tackle workplace bullying head-on with a law or policy affecting state employees.
CEOs in Minnesota make 305 times what the average worker in the state earns, according to the Executive Paywatch report, a comprehensive online database that tracks CEO pay at S&P 500 companies. The Paywatch analysis showed that across the United States in 2014, the average worker earned approximately $36,000 per year, while CEO pay averaged $13.5 million per year – a ratio of 373-to-1.
The labor movement was braced for a U.S. Supreme Court vote in 2016 that would have affirmed corporate interests’ contention that mandatory union dues are an unfair requirement for the affected public workers. Rebecca Friedrichs, a teacher in Buena Vista, Calif, sued the California Teachers Association because she was required to pay union dues to cover the cost of representation. It was expected that the court would rule in her favor, possibly allowing public employee “free riders” to enjoy the benefits of a union contract without having to pay dues to help maintain them. Deprived of resources, public sector unions – now among the strongest in the country – would have been severely weakened. The court instead deadlocked 4-4 on the Friedrichs’ decision after conservative Justice Antonin Scalia died prior to the vote. While this outcome preserved public employees’ collective strength for now, similar cases, affecting millions of workers, are expected to come before the high court in the next few years.
Construct Tomorrow, a Minnesota program to recruit more people into the Building Trades, reached a milestone with more than 15,000 students attending an event. Construct Tomorrow opens the door on the world of the skilled construction trades. The program is sponsored by the Apprenticeship Coordinators Association, the Associated General Contractors and the Minnesota Department of Labor and Industry. The first “Construct Tomorrow” event was held in October 2013.
2016

Twin Cities adopt earned safe and sick time policies

Some 40 percent of Minnesotans lack access to paid time off when they are sick. To address that problem, unions and other progressive groups, along with responsible businesses, campaigned for passage of ordinances in both Minneapolis and St. Paul requiring all employers to provide earned safe and sick time. Because Congress has failed to act on this important public health and family issue, communities across the country are stepping up with their own measures.