

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

# Workers' Rights and the History of Labor Unions

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*What is a labor union? In the past, when workers were mistreated by their employers, there was nothing they could do about it. Labor unions were the workers' solution to this problem. This article sets the scene for the dawn of labor unions, explores the history of workers' rights, and explains the strategies they still use today. As you read this text, identify 3 strategies that union members used to seek justice and create change.*

- [1] Have you ever heard the phrase "There's strength in numbers"? For many years, people who worked on farms, in factories, or in other low-wage positions were sometimes forced to endure<sup>1</sup> terrible conditions with little pay. But they soon found, with "strength in numbers," that they could take charge of their circumstances. That's where labor unions come in.



*"Miners Just Leaving the Elevator Shaft of Virginia-Pocahontas Coal Company Mine #4 near Richlands, Virginia" by The U.S. National Archives is in the public domain.*

A labor union is a group of workers who join together to ask their employers for better payment, working hours, and working conditions. Labor unions are very common today, and many workers in the United States are members of different kinds of unions. However, unions did not always exist. Modern labor unions didn't appear in the United States until the late 1800s.

The United States experienced an Industrial Revolution from about 1860 until about 1920. People started to use machines and factories to make products instead of making them by hand. Factory owners became rich very quickly, but they did not treat their workers with kindness or respect. Employees had to work up to 12 hours per day for only a few dollars. They did not always get weekends off. In many industries, workers faced inhumane<sup>2</sup> conditions such as having to bend over all day, or breathing in smoke from the machines.

One of the worst industries to work in was the coal industry, where workers spent all day deep underground in coal mines. The mines were very dark and usually damp and cold. Workers had to breathe coal dust and poisonous gases. They had to crawl through the mine in narrow tunnels and pull carts full of coal behind them. There was always a chance that the whole mine could collapse from an explosion. Because coal miners were paid so little, many families could not afford to buy enough food. They had to send their children to work in the mines too, just so the family could have enough money to live on. Children worked six days a week just like their parents, so they could not go to school.

- [5] Workers decided they could not keep living such hard lives. They knew they had to work together to negotiate<sup>3</sup> with the rich and powerful factory owners, so they grouped together to form labor unions. Labor unions used 3 different strategies to protect workers:

1. **Endure (verb):** to continue without giving in  
2. **Inhumane (adjective):** not kind or gentle to people or animals

The first strategy was called “collective bargaining.” Workers chose a few leaders to represent them in a meeting with the factory or mine owner. In this meeting, everyone would agree to a new contract that gave workers shorter hours, higher pay, and safer working conditions. If the factory owner did not agree to the contract, all the workers would strike, or stop working until they got what they wanted. Many strikes occurred during the Industrial Revolution, and workers still go on strike today.

The second strategy was giving benefits to union members. If any worker got hurt on the job, the union would pay for the doctor’s visit, medicine, and sometimes food.

The third strategy was working with the government to pass more laws. Union leaders could make deals with politicians to pass laws that helped workers. For example, child labor became illegal and the government began to send inspectors to make sure factories were safe.

Unions were very successful in making sure business owners did not take advantage of their workers. Unions still serve many of these same functions today. Workers still go on strike when their employer will not agree to a better contract, and unions still work with the government to get laws passed. Many people across the country rely on unions to keep their jobs safe and their families fed.

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## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Explain how the Industrial Revolution relates to the history of workers' rights. Cite evidence from the text in your response.  
  

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2. PART A: Which of the following best identifies a central idea of this text?
  - A. By forming unions, workers protected their rights and made important social changes.
  - B. Children were the first members of labor unions before the trend spread among adult workers.
  - C. Workers acted illegally and outside the law, so their strikes were not always respected.
  - D. Labor unions were a popular trend in the past, but after the Industrial Revolution, workers have moved beyond them.
3. PART B: Which phrase from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
  - A. "Labor unions are very common today, and many workers in the United States are members in different kinds of unions." (Paragraph 2)
  - B. "Many strikes occurred during the Industrial Revolution, and workers still go on strike today." (Paragraph 6)
  - C. "If any worker got hurt on the job, the union would pay for the doctor's visit, medicine, and sometimes food." (Paragraph 7)
  - D. "Many people across the country rely on unions to keep their jobs safe and their families fed." (Paragraph 9)
4. PART A: What does the word "inhumane" most closely mean as it is used in paragraph 3?
  - A. Not human; animal
  - B. Difficult yet rewarding
  - C. Unequal
  - D. Cruel and brutal

5. PART B: Which paragraph from the text provides the best support for the answer to Part A?
- A. Paragraph 2
  - B. Paragraph 4
  - C. Paragraph 5
  - D. Paragraph 9

## Discussion Questions

**Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.**

1. Without unions, workers have to do whatever their employers say, including working without benefits or in dangerous conditions, or they could be fired. A labor union helps the workers have a little power so that their rights can be respected. How can unions and employers come to fair compromises? What rights should workers demand? What rights belong to employers?
2. How do people create change? Can strategies like collective bargaining, working with the government, or agreeing to benefits help people create change in other scenarios? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.