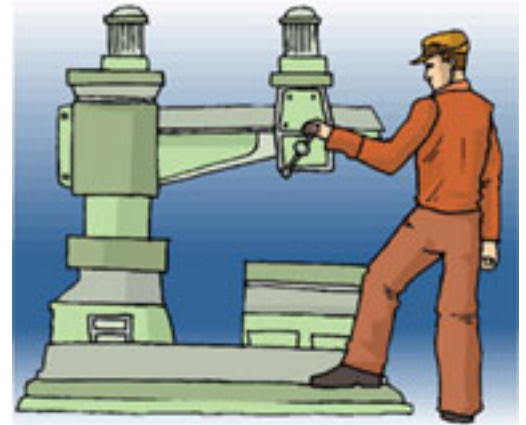


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FDR's New Deal - Organized Labor

In 1936, the Great Depression still battered America. Roosevelt began his second term as leader of a nation in distress. Putting people to work was one of FDR's top goals, but he also wanted better lives for working people.

In his first term, Roosevelt had sent to Congress the National Industrial Recovery Act. This bill set standards for wages and working hours. It also did away with child labor. The NIRA had even established the right of laborers to organize. This set the stage for labor groups to bargain for wages and working conditions.



Congress passed the NIRA. The standards were implemented in workplaces around the country. Then the Supreme Court struck down the NIRA. The law gave the president too much power, the Court said. It also meddled in business within states, where only the states could make rules. The new standards were dismantled. It was back to the drawing board for labor.

Some skilled workers already had unions to represent them. Industrial laborers, however, had no unions. Wages and conditions for these workers were often poor. But laborers could see that workers acting as a group had a basis for bargaining. They could negotiate for better working conditions. Some members of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) began to push for unions for unskilled industrial workers.

The AFL leadership rejected this change. They also continued to deny membership to blacks and women. In order to go after their goals, the industrial groups split off from the AFL. The largest of these splinter groups was the mine and garment workers. These unskilled labor groups formed the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Their leaders began a drive to organize laborers. The CIO welcomed black workers and women, and people from these groups joined by the thousands.

Labor leaders fought hard to unionize the automobile and steel industries. Some large companies began to recognize unions, but others refused. Labor leaders fought back with sit-down strikes. In these protests, workers occupied the workplace. They refused to work or to leave. Owners couldn't bring in new workers. No production was taking place, and owners were losing money.

Business owners were angered by the strike tactics. They didn't think labor should dictate to business. In frustration, management sometimes responded with force. Police or hired guards were brought in to evict workers. In this high stakes conflict, force was met with force. Laborers fought back. The violence was often deadly. In 1937, a battle between police and workers at a steel mill in Chicago resulted in the deaths of ten men.

Meanwhile, the nation's leaders continued to work on labor standards. Congress passed the National Labor

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Relations Act. This bill set up a board to make decisions about labor issues. The National Labor Relations Board had three members. Part of its job was to help labor organize and choose leaders. The NLRB also followed up on complaints of unfair practices.

Congress made another try at national rules for labor with the Fair Labor Standards Act. Like the old NIRA, the FLSA addressed wage and hours issues. Under this bill, committees made up of labor and management set standards for each industry. Each committee set its own minimum wage. But FLSA required that by 1945, every industry should pay no less than forty cents an hour. The FLSA set in place the now-standard forty-hour week and required overtime pay for over forty hours of work. Child labor rules were also re-established.

Even with all the advances, the problems of labor versus management didn't go away. Business people felt that the labor laws gave workers more rights than employers. Some businesses were unable to survive the demands of a powerful labor force. Some were unwilling to concede that labor should have rights at all.

Other problems came from within the labor movement. There was corruption in some areas of union leadership. The conflict between the AFL and the CIO continued. Still, supported by Roosevelt, workers had made great strides. Labor had established its strength and purpose, and there was no going back. Roosevelt's New Deal had forged a better deal for working people.

FDR's New Deal - Organized Labor

Questions

1. Explain the provisions of the NIRA. Why was any further legislation needed?

2. What does it mean for labor to organize? Why is this an advantage to workers?

3. Why did some labor groups break off from the American Federation of Labor?

- A. The AFL was under the control of the government.
- B. They wanted unions for unskilled labor and AFL was opposed.
- C. They thought AFL was becoming too radical in its demands.
- D. They disagreed with AFL's stance that labor had the right to organize.

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- _____ 4. What two groups were denied membership in the AFL?
- A. professional and skilled workers
 - B. mine and garment workers
 - C. auto and steel workers

5. Describe a sit-down strike. Why were they so frustrating to management?

- _____ 6. What was the purpose of the National Labor Relations Board?
- A. to help labor organize and to investigate unfair labor practices
 - B. to moderate between labor and government
 - C. to moderate between management and government
 - D. to provide public relations services to organized labor

7. List the provisions of the Fair Labor Standards Act.

8. Explain the gains made by workers under Roosevelt's New Deal.
