

Labor Unions
(1982 folder)

WHY UNIONS?



American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations

Ever walk into your local chain department store and ask to see the president? Or into your local telephone office and ask for an appointment with the chairman of the board?

Or maybe you are a high school student or one of the millions of college students in America. How many times have you talked with the principal or president of the college or university? For that matter, how many times have you personally talked to your professor in that large auditorium-packed lecture course, "Humanities 1," or something similar?

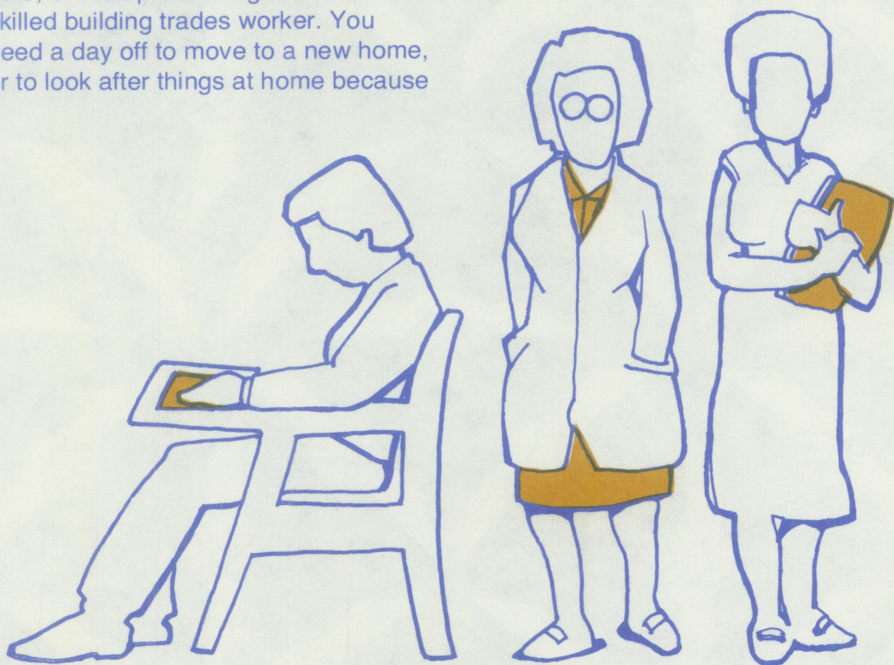
Now suppose you are out in the world working for a living as an engineer or technician or administrative and clerical worker in an aerospace, electronics, or insurance firm. Or in one of the big companies in the basic industries such as steel, auto, or food processing. Or as a skilled building trades worker. You need a day off to move to a new home, or to look after things at home because

your spouse is ill. Or maybe you unexpectedly come down with sickness. Do you call your supervisor or department head and ask for time off? What if the supervisor says "No?" What do you do then? Go to the chairman of the board?

Or maybe you've been a loyal, productive worker for the past year or two. You know the company is doing well and making money. So you want a raise and figure you're worth more than you're earning. Do you ask your boss? What if the boss says "No" or offers a few pennies?

What do you do then?

Or assume you've been a loyal dedicated employee for 17 years. You've got a husband or wife, kids in high school hoping to go to college, equity in the house and stature in the



community. You are over 40 but retirement is a long way off yet. Then one day your company is merged with or acquired by another one. New management moves in and decides you're through. They want younger employees; it's new company policy. Or they want more efficient production and are installing some new automated equipment that eliminates the need for your job—and you.

What do you do then and who do you talk to about finding a new job or taking another job in the same company through job retraining? How are you going to pull up roots in your community?

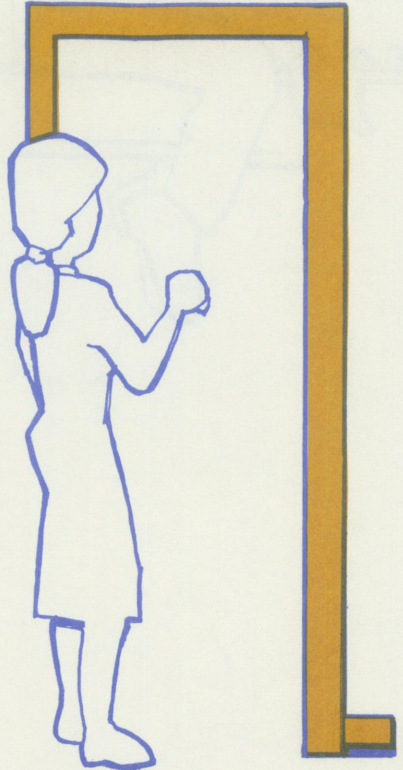
In each of these cases, what can you as an individual do to protect yourself and your livelihood? Who has the final word if you disagree with your employer's decision?

Now consider that there are millions of other wage and salary earners, just like you, working for a living in organizations or firms that are apt to be very large, fluid and impersonal.

Some people say you can't fight city hall or buck the boss. In a democracy, this isn't true. You can. And this is what unions are for. To establish industrial democracy in our private enterprise and corporate-oriented economy. To represent the individual's interest when

the company's interest conflicts with it or fails, even, to consider it. To represent public or government employees as they seek to apply industrial democracy to their jobs and working conditions.

Look at it this way. Without collective bargaining, the individual employee has no voice, but is subject to every arbitrary decision the employer makes. Some minimum legal standards excepted, the employer sets hours of work, level of wages and salaries, and determines job assignments and production quotas. When promotions





are involved, the boss can reward favorites and ignore qualified workers of longer service. The employer can lay off or fire any worker—for any reason or even for no reason. The boss can manipulate the organization chart and demote or shunt aside.

The employer can, in fact, be a dictator, answerable to no one. Neither democracy nor human dignity has any place in this scheme of things.

In a nation, the benevolent dictator, trying to look out for the best interests of the people, is no substitute for democratic government. And a paternalistic employer is no substitute for democratically structured employee organizations and collective bargaining.

Where there is collective bargaining in industry, the individual worker has a voice and is not subject to arbitrary decisions. That worker shares with other employees and with the employer the responsibility for

establishing orderly procedures for determining wages, hours of work, rates of production, promotion and layoff policies, and just penalties for the violation of necessary work rules.

As part of a union, you have the strength that comes from numbers and, through your union, the ability to hire able staff people—negotiators, lawyers, research specialists, and others who are skilled in the arts of collective bargaining.

Only as part of a group do you have the economic strength that permits bargaining with the employer on a basis approaching equality.

You may not find all the answers to your job problems by becoming a union member. But you will be free to present your problems and have them considered. This is the function of shop and department stewards, grievance committees and business agents. If

you don't like the job they're doing, you have an opportunity to do something about it. They're not appointed. They're elected—by you and your fellow employees. The same goes for the other union officers. They're democratically elected and the members do the nominating.

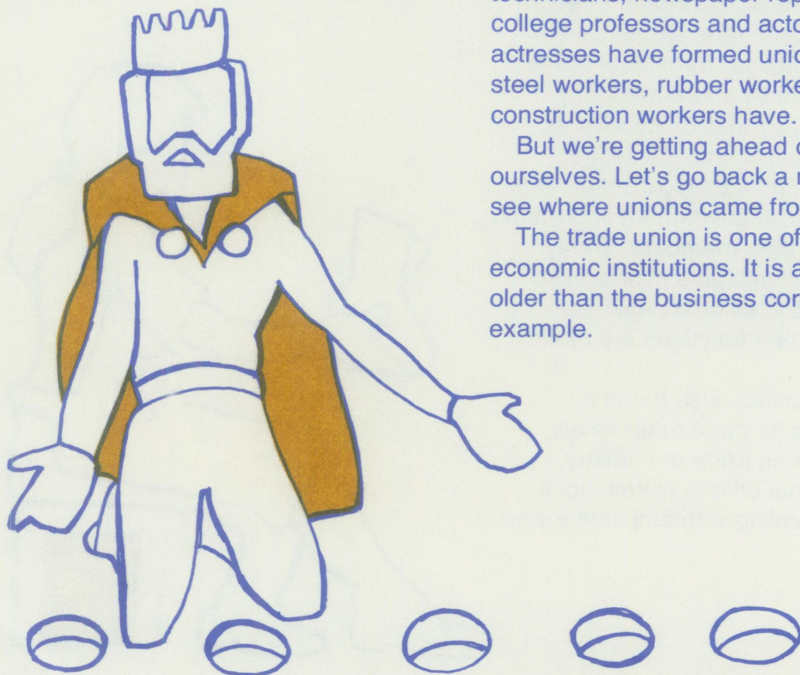
The policies and conduct of the union are determined by its constitution and by-laws and these, too, are subject to amendment and change by the membership.

More workers are forming or joining unions. And it is easy to see why. In this day and age of high speed technological change, multinational corporations and conglomerates, if we didn't have unions for the people who work in them, then we'd probably have to invent them.

This is why teachers, fire fighters, government employees, engineers and technicians, newspaper reporters, college professors and actors and actresses have formed unions just as steel workers, rubber workers and construction workers have.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. Let's go back a minute and see where unions came from.

The trade union is one of our oldest economic institutions. It is a good deal older than the business corporation, for example.



Where Unions Come From

The history of trade unionism in this country is frequently dated from 1792, when a local union was formed by the journeymen cordwainers (shoemakers) of Philadelphia. Within the next ten years, unions of shoemakers, carpenters and printers were founded in Baltimore, Boston, New York and several other cities.

Until after the Civil War, most of these trade unions were located in Atlantic seaboard cities and were local unions of workers in a particular trade or industry. These isolated locals sensing the need for greater strength formed city-wide federations called "trade assemblies" for mutual aid and support in strikes and emergency situations. They also functioned as boycott organizations, published newspapers, took political action and lobbied for local government legislation favorable to their members. Today these federations have evolved into city central bodies or state central bodies and their functions are much the same.

But local unions also found it necessary to join with other locals within the same trade or industry. These national unions were labor's answer to dealing with employers who

were selling their goods in a national market. Machinist local unions in New York, for example, worked for iron foundry employers who were competing with other iron foundries in Cleveland. In this national competition, the isolated New York local union soon found itself competing with its counterpart local union in Cleveland and in other plants of the industry located elsewhere. As the employers competed, wages, as a cost of production factor, were bid down and the lowest rates in the industry tended to prevail throughout the country.



So in 1859, the machinist and blacksmith locals united and formed a permanent national organization. The molders did the same in 1859 and the printers had formed their national union in 1850. In the decade after the Civil War, twenty-six new national unions were formed. Some of them exist today. The locomotive engineers, the locomotive firemen, carpenters, bricklayers, and painters all date from this period. The purpose of all these national unions was the same: to

influence wages, working conditions and work rules more or less uniformly throughout their trade or industry.

The isolated locals thus learned that by pooling their resources and cooperating with one another, they could more effectively deal with employers and at the same time give help and support to locals in distress. They demonstrated once again that in unity there is strength.

Today, national and international trade unions (they're called international because they have members in Canada and U.S. trust territories) are the keystone of the American labor movement. Just over 100 of them are affiliated with the AFL-CIO.



So when anyone asks, “Where did trade unions come from?,” you might say they came out of the necessity of the working people to look after their own interests as businesses and industry organized and developed along national lines.’

Another way to look at it is on the basis of self-interest as expressed by both labor and management—the employer and employee. Each promotes his own self-interest. Wherever we find competing self-interests, we find the possibility of conflict. It was out of such conflict that the trade union movement was born. And it was to resolve the issues such

conflict produces that collective bargaining was developed.

One thing about it, 200 years have brought little change in the issues at stake or the basic need for unions. The individual member—whether a cordwainer or computer engineer or programmer, artisan or actor—still has basic economic and social needs and has to deal with an employer to get most of them. Forming a union or joining a union makes the job a whole lot easier.



What Unions Want

Union members represent a broad cross section of America. They come from all walks of life in all parts of the country. They want what any American wants. Peace. Prosperity and security. Dignity of the individual. They want these for each and every American.

There are two ways they go about getting them. One is through collective bargaining. The other is through political and social action. Let's talk about them one at a time.

Collective bargaining is a rational, democratic and peaceful way to resolve conflict. In recent years, some 150,000 collective bargaining agreements have been made. Only two percent of them were affected by strikes. So in 98 percent of all cases, collective bargaining was successful. Not a bad record.


Back around the turn of the century, things were different. There were not very many unions then, and those that existed had a tough time of it. Employer resistance to collective bargaining was fierce and many times violent. There was no National Labor Relations Act then to give workers the right to organize and to promote collective bargaining. But workers

persisted and the fledgling unions survived. Collective bargaining became the accepted way of regulating employer-employee disputes.

It took a lot of nerve for employees to stand up for their rights in those days. There were no job safety standards, paid vacations, sick leave or retirement plan. Hiring and firing, promotion and layoff policies were under the exclusive control of employers.

But they did it, and today we are enjoying the results. You can't put a price tag on the human dignity individual workers feel when they stand up for their rights, either.

It hasn't changed today. Every time



the union-negotiated contract expires, the members have to assess the situation again. They look at their wages and compare them with current price levels; look at company profits; determine if pensions, health and medical care plans are adequate. These are the quantitative factors that go into wages and salaries at collective bargaining time.

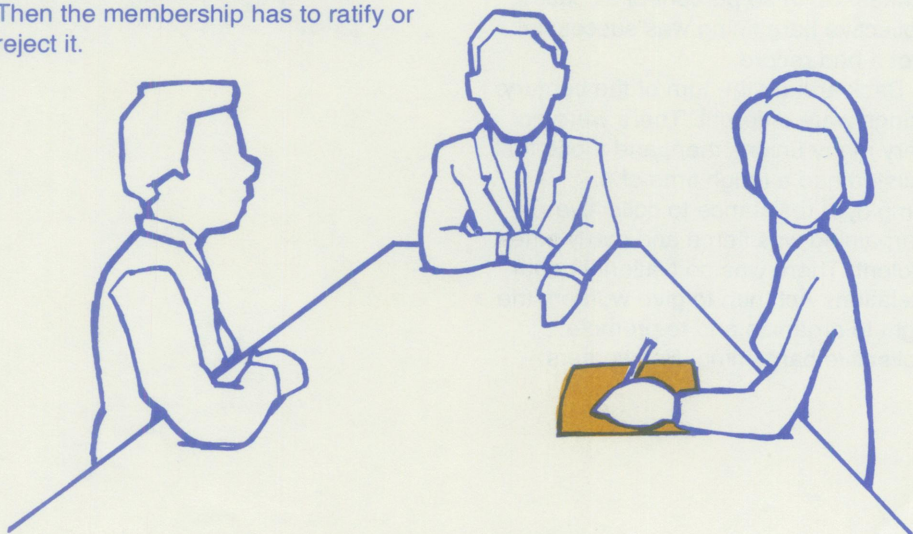
There are qualitative factors, too. Things like work rules, work speeds, occupational safety and health, time off for vacations and holidays, and promotion policies.

Put them all together and you have a package of wages, benefits, and work rules that becomes the subject of contract negotiations. Employers—large or small—don't just hand out this package. The employees have to stick together, send their elected representatives into the negotiating room with employers or their representatives, and through a process of fact finding, discussion, argument and debate, make an agreement on just what the package will contain. Then the membership has to ratify or reject it.

We call it collective bargaining, and it has played a vital part in lifting the living standards of the American worker to the highest level in the world.

Think about this next time you hear a company official say, "Here's what we give our employees." Even if that company doesn't have a union or the employees he is talking about aren't part of the union in the firm, do you really think they would give these wages and benefits if there were no unions? Maybe. But it isn't likely unless a pattern of union-won gains is in existence.

But even then, the employee has no voice in matters affecting the job. Where's the dignity in that system? Or security?



About Strikes

Unions negotiate for agreements—not strikes. No union wants a strike. Strikes develop only when both sides—labor and management—can in no other way reach an agreement.

To union members, a strike means sacrifice for themselves and their families. And they will not vote to go on a strike unless the issues involved are so great they are worth the sacrifice.

Remember, strikes are not called or ordered by union leaders. They are voted by the union membership—to take strike action or not to take it—and the majority rules.

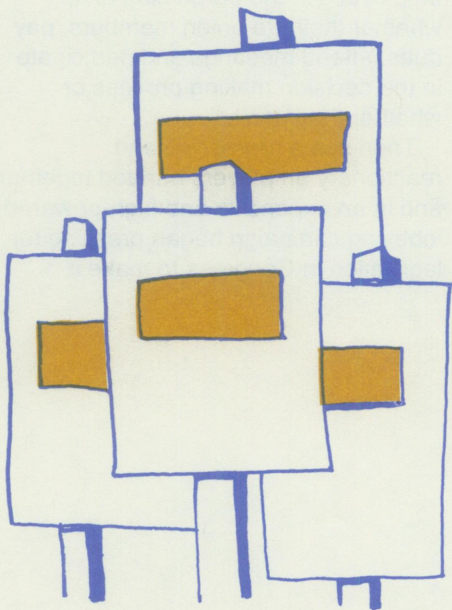
We've already said 98 percent of all contracts negotiated result in agreements achieved without a strike. In fact, the work time lost because of strikes in recent years has been less than three days for every four work years. The common cold causes more lost time than strikes.

But strikes are controversial and controversy makes news. This, no doubt, is why many people think strikes are the rule rather than the exception.

Management can trigger a strike simply by refusing to bargain or to yield on a point of contention. But the union has to take the first overt action and

the strike is the first visible sign of dispute. This probably accounts for the public blaming unions for strikes in many cases.

But the right to strike—or right to withhold one's labor in unison and agreement with fellow workers—is paramount to maintaining democracy. In totalitarian countries the right to strike is prohibited along with all other freedoms. Put in proper perspective, then, the right to strike is a matter of freedom, and a democracy cannot function without freedom.



Politics and Unions

Collective bargaining is one way to help achieve peace, prosperity and security, and individual dignity in America today. The other way is through political action.

Union members learned early in the game that they can lose in the halls of the legislature what they've gained at the collective bargaining table. Union security is a good example. Prior to 1947, many unions had made bargaining agreements with companies and employers that if the union was going to represent all workers, then all workers should belong to the union. This seemed reasonable, since unions are legally bound to represent all employees in the bargaining unit, whether they are union members, pay dues, attend meetings and participate in the decision making process or whether they don't.

Then some regressive and reactionary employers banded together and in an expensive and high-powered lobbying campaign began pressing for legislation in Congress to make it

possible to outlaw such agreements. Congress went along and permitted states to enact laws banning such agreements.

Today, in 20 states, the law allows an individual to benefit from a union-negotiated contract without paying dues or contributing anything toward maintaining the union or servicing the contract.

That person is a free rider on the backs of fellow employees. And there's not much dignity in such a distinction.

It is interesting to note, too, that there is not much prosperity in the states that have these so-called "right-to-work" laws. In North Carolina, for example, where few workers are organized, the average weekly wage of a production worker in manufacturing is about \$175 a week less than in the state of Washington, where nearly half of the workforce is organized. The difference is \$9,100 worth of lost income per worker per year in North Carolina. Not to mention a lower standard of living and a less profitable level of economic activity for merchants and businessmen. We get the same conclusion when we compare Virginia with West Virginia—in fact, when we compare all the states that forbid union security agreements with the 30 other states that permit it.

But the trade union movement, as a whole, does not operate on the narrow grounds of self-interest. It exists to help those people least able to help themselves.

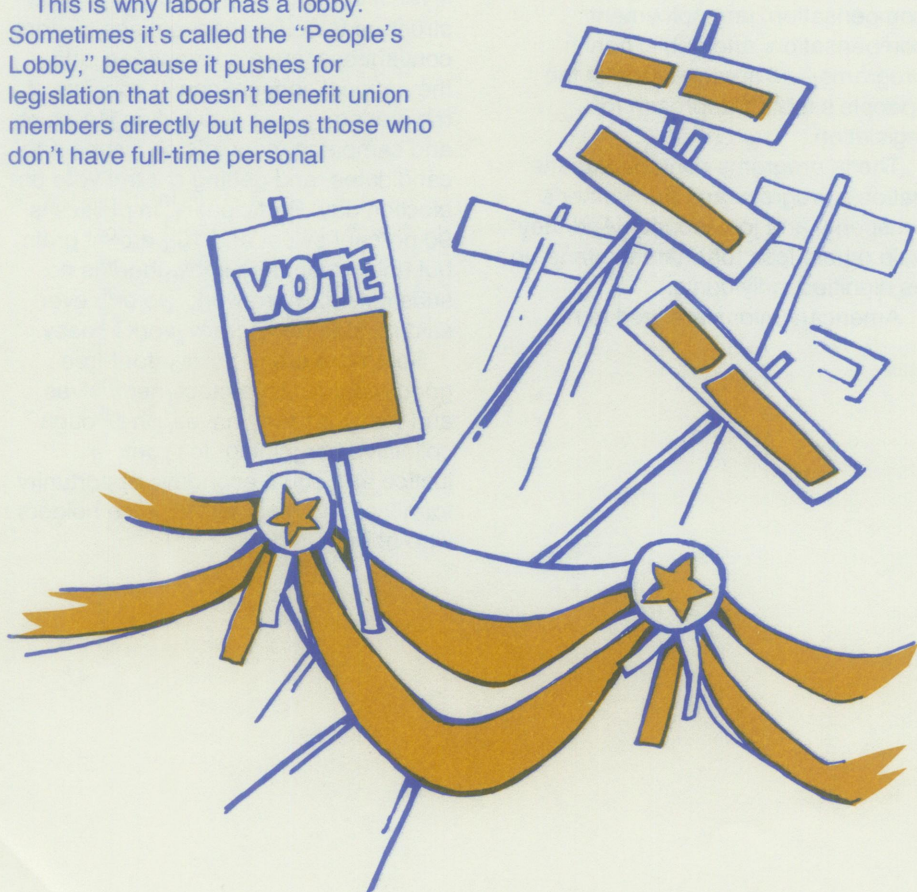
It exists not only to win fair wages and working conditions and employment security for its members, but to champion the cause of justice and equal opportunity for those people beset by ignorance, poverty, prejudice and discrimination.

This means unions have a clear obligation to represent the interests of a great many people who are not union members.

This is why labor has a lobby. Sometimes it's called the "People's Lobby," because it pushes for legislation that doesn't benefit union members directly but helps those who don't have full-time personal

representatives in the state capitals and in Washington to look out for their interests. Labor's record of support for free public education, for instance, goes all the way back to 1832. And labor was in the forefront with teachers, church leaders, and university professors to get federal aid for grade schools, high schools and colleges and universities in the 1960s. Scholarships and loans for poor and needy students are part of labor's legislative program in education, too.

Then there's the case of minimum wage legislation. Almost all union



members make more than the federal minimum wage. But many people who aren't union members make less. And a lot more wouldn't be making the minimum if the law didn't exist. Labor was the first organized group to fight for a minimum wage, and it continues to press for legislation that will assure that the minimum wage will not fall behind the level of inflation or the government's official poverty level. A minimum wage protected against inflation is the best way to fight poverty and to help the working poor.

Equal employment opportunities, voting rights, civil rights, workers' compensation, unemployment compensation, and public health programs—all are the result of the "people's lobby" approach to legislation.

These programs contribute to the nation's progress and the worker's prosperity and job security. And they help others less fortunate to stand up as dignified individuals.

American unions are wed to no

single party; they support liberal and progressive candidates in both major parties. Neither have they tried to form their own national political party. Union members participate in the existing parties to make their voices heard and their votes felt when it comes time to select candidates, write party platforms, and persuade people to vote for their favored candidates and programs. In the AFL-CIO, union members do their political work through the Committee on Political Education (COPE). Their interest begins at the grass roots level and their work begins there at the precinct level. It continues up through the party structure to county conventions, district conventions, state conventions, and the national conventions. It consists of registering voters, distributing literature and campaign materials on issues and candidates, and getting out the vote on election day. Participating in politics is 90 percent sweat and 10 percent brain, but union members know there is no substitute for hard work. No one ever said making democracy work is easy.

So unions are in politics for three good reasons: to protect themselves and the gains they have won through collective bargaining, to promote justice and equal economic opportunity for all, and to elect public office holders who believe in both.

Facing the Future

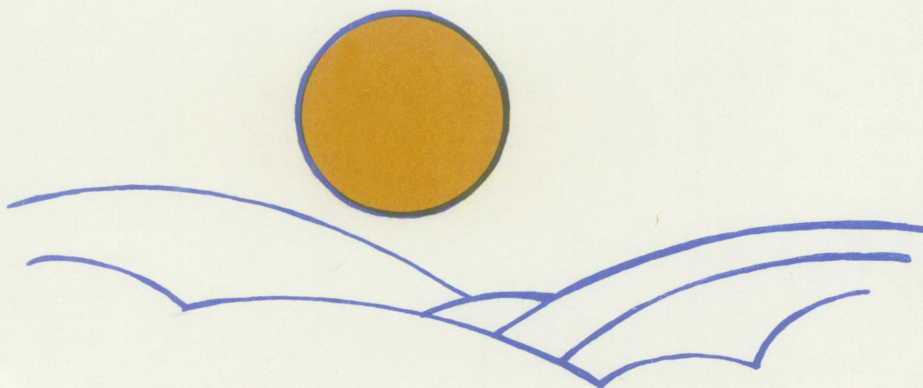
If you are now working on a job, or just out of high school or college, or otherwise active in the labor market then you have a lot of job thinking to do.

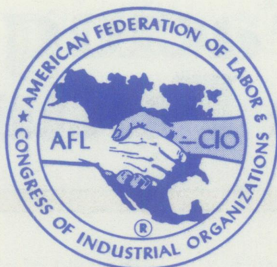
Give just a moment of thought to the long history of the trade union movement in this country and compare the days of the past with the here and now. Then look to the future. The big employers aren't getting any smaller,

the rate of change isn't slowing, but it is opening up new kinds of jobs.

Think about the opportunity to join a union—about collective bargaining—about industrial democracy and peace, prosperity and security, and individual dignity on the job.

It's something to think about.





**American Federation
of Labor and
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Organizations.**

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