How did workers win these rights? The Labor Movement!

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Unions have been around since shortly after the American Revolution. As the numbers of wage earners in the early nation grew, workers found they needed to form organizations to defend their common interests and advocate for shorter workdays, better pay, and such social changes like free public education for all.

In 1877 workers acted together on a national basis for the first time. The great railroad **strikes** of that year demonstrated clearly to workers that the ability of corporations to influence the course of events and to influence elected officials and the courts had to be matched by well-organized workers. Responding to the growing power of national corporations, local **unions** began to reach out to one another, forming national organizations as well.

Combined in the 1880s into the American Federation of Labor (AFL), these worker organizations sought "a fair day's work for a fair day's pay." In this period rose the call for an "eight-hour day," so that workers and their families might have some time to spend together, and celebrate life with leisure. The **union** members had a slogan: "Eight hours for work, eight hours for sleep, eight hours for what we will." At a time when ten- and twelve-hour work days were common, and six- and even seven- day work weeks, the push for an eight- hour day was considered "radical" by employers and their anti-worker allies.

The fight for an eight-hour day occurred alongside others: campaigns for unemployment insurance, workers' compensation, health and safety laws, child labor laws, and more. With these battles, the new **unions** strove to bring fairness and dignity to the lives of workers and their families and communities.

Due to employer opposition, it wasn't until 1935 that a federal law—the National Labor Relations Act—passed Congress, finally giving workers the right to form **unions** and engage in organized activities on their own behalf. Passage of the NLRA is but one part of the labor history of the 1930s. For a decade or so, an extraordinarily militant working class faced the harsh conditions of the Great Depression with a creative variety of **collective** tactics, including the use of marches, demonstrations, strikes, political action, and, above all, industrial union organizing. As a result, the new industrial **unions** became a civil rights movement, because they organized everyone—whites and people of color, men and women, native-born and immigrants—at the same time.

Gaining millions of new members, the labor movement became the backbone of progressive politics in the nation. Conscious of the enormous upsurge in unionization and worker activism in the 1930s, Roosevelt signed legislation creating the “New Deal,” which consisted of several laws. In addition to the NLRA, the most important laws for workers included the Social Security Act, which put in place a guaranteed minimum level of income for workers in their retirement; the Unemployment Insurance Act, which supported unemployed workers while they looked for work; the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA); and the GI Bill.

The FLSA set a minimum wage, declared the standard workday to be eight hours, and the standard work week to be forty hours. It regulated child labor and required payment of time and a half (“over- time”) for work past the forty-hour week. More than any other law, the FLSA is what’s behind the bumper sticker that reads, “The labor movement: the folks that brought you the weekend.” With these laws and policies, the New Deal addressed some of the most pressing problems that had been faced by workers for more than a century.

Although often identified in the public mind with President Roosevelt, the New Deal was not the work of one man. Rather, it was the direct result of events such as the San Francisco General **Strike**, factory occupations by workers, sit-down strikes, and industry-wide organizing, all of which established workers’ power as a social force to be reckoned with.

For many decades after the New Deal set a baseline, individual advancement for working people relied on peaceful **collective** struggle through the labor movement. Unions bargained for their members, and proposed and lobbied for laws that could benefit all working people, such as advances in the minimum wage.

By the 1950s, the working class was becoming “middle class.” Through **collective** bargaining, health and retirement benefits became a standard part of the **compensation** employers paid to workers. The strength of organized labor enabled working people to rise from the economic problems that had affected them since the Industrial Revolution. Most workers and their families attained a level of comfort in the 1950s only dreamt of for generations.

Unions also lobbied for passage of Fair Employment Practices laws, which imposed penalties for discrimination in hiring and promotion due to race. When the FEP failed to pass the U.S. Congress, **unions** and civil rights organizations worked together to pass state FEP laws. California’s, for instance, passed in 1959, thanks to a coalition effort of **unions**, community organizations, and civil rights groups.