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Labor History

Timeline

California and the United States

Courtesy of California Assemblywoman Sally Havice, Chair, Assembly Committee on Public Employees, Retirement and Social Security; reprinted by the California Federation of Teachers, AFT/AFL-CIO, to celebrate Labor Day 2000

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| 1840 | President Martin Van Buren signs an executive order establishing a 10-hour workday without a decrease in pay. | 1886 | California Governor Stoneman declared a legal holiday and led union members up Market Street in San Francisco on May 11, at least a year before Labor Day was legalized as a holiday in New York; founding convention of American Federation of Labor |
| 1849 | San Francisco and Sacramento Carpenters strike for \$16 a day; they settle for \$14. | 1887 | First federal labor relations law passes. It applies to railroads and provides for arbitration. |
| 1850 | San Francisco Typographical Society formed by printers at the Alta California newspaper to oppose a wage cut. | 1890 | Typographers go on strike at the Los Angeles Times; owner Harrison Gray Otis locks them out and declares war on the Los Angeles labor movement; Los Angeles known as 'home of the open shop.' |
| 1863 | The San Francisco Trades Union, with 15 affiliated unions, formed to support a tailors' strike, agitate for the eight hour day, and produce a labor newspaper. | 1894 | Pullman Strike: Thousands of Oakland workers take over Southern Pacific rail yards, the western terminus of the transcontinental railroad. |
| 1877 | Formation of Workingmen's Party of California, composed of white workers angry at the power of the railroad barons and worried about competition from Chinese workers. | 1901 | Formation of the California State Federation of Labor/AFL, the political arm of the statewide labor movement |
| 1881 | Samuel Gompers establishes the immediate predecessor organization to the American Federation of Labor, the Federation of Trades and Labor Unions | 1903 | First recorded California farmworker strike, in Oxnard; Japanese and Mexican beetworkers form the JMLA, supported by Los Angeles Labor Council, but request for charter rejected by Samuel Gompers and the national AF-of-L; the Department of Commerce and Labor is created by Congress, and the Secretary of Labor becomes a member of the Cabinet. |
| 1882 | Peter McGuire, founder of the Carpenters Union and co-founder of the AF-of-L, stood up in a meeting of the New York Central Labor Union on May 18, and made a motion that a parade be held on the first Monday of September to honor labor and to "show the strength and esprit de corps of the trade and labor organizations." | | |

1905	The Supreme Court rules that a maximum-hours law is unconstitutional.	1923	Marine and Transport Workers Industrial Union (IWW) strikes the west coast, briefly shutting down harbors before being brutally repressed.
1907	San Francisco Streetcar Workers Union is crushed after 25 workers are killed and hundreds wounded in battles with strikebreakers; San Francisco and Los Angeles women trade unionists form the Wage Earners Suffrage League.	1926	Several Hollywood unions sign first Studio Basic Agreement; the Railway Labor Act requires employers to bargain collectively and bars discrimination against employees for joining a union. It sets provisions for settling railway labor disputes through mediation, voluntary arbitration and fact-finding boards.
1910	<i>Los Angeles Times</i> building bombed by Ironworkers national secretary-treasurer John McNamara and his brother James; 20 workers die.	1930	U.S. Supreme Court upholds the Railway Labor Act prohibiting employers from interfering or coercing workers choosing bargaining representatives.
1911	The McNamaras, on advice of their attorney, Clarence Darrow, confess guilt ; confession four days before election ruins labor/Socialist candidate Job Harriman's bid for Los Angeles mayor; LA stays open shop town for another quarter century; California Legislature passes workers comp and eight hour day for women laws.	1931	The Davis-Bacon Act passes, providing for payment of prevailing wage rates to laborers and mechanics employed by contractors and subcontractors on public construction.
1912	Massachusetts adopts the first minimum-wage act for women and minors.	1932	The Anti-Injunction Act passes, prohibiting some federal injunctions in labor disputes and outlawing "yellow-dog" contracts - agreements where an employee agrees not to join a union. Wisconsin adopts the nation's first unemployment insurance act. Franklin Delano Roosevelt is elected president, as the country endures its fourth year of depression.
1913	California's Wheatland Hop Riot begins with protest against horrible working conditions on Durst ranch, leads to statewide witch hunt against IWW members and other labor activists; the U.S. Department of Labor gets the power to act as mediator and to appoint commissioners of conciliation in labor disputes.	1933	International Ladies Garment Workers Union, led by organizer Rose Pesotta, runs successful strike of mostly Latina garment workers in Los Angeles; 20,000 cotton workers strike throughout California's central valleys; the National Industrial Recovery Act passes, guaranteeing the right of employees of companies with government contracts to organize and bargain collectively. Later declared unconstitutional.
1914	The Clayton Act passes, limiting injunctions in labor disputes. Picketing and other union activities declared legal.	1934	San Francisco General Strike: the key event of modern west coast industrial unionism, led by longshoremen and sailors; Alameda County workers go out too, including streetcar drivers, calling for the municipalization of the privately-held streetcar company; general strikes in other cities.
1916	Preparedness Day Bombing: labor activist Tom Mooney convicted on perjured testimony of setting off a bomb; "Defend Tom Mooney" a labor demand until Governor Culbert Olson pardons him in 1939; S.F. Riggers and Stevedores dock strike fails; the Adamson Act establishes an eight-hour day for work on railroads. The law is enacted to eliminate a threatened nationwide railroad strike.	1935	The National Labor Relations Act, also known as The Wagner Act, establishes the right of workers to organize and bargain collectively. The federal Social Security Act passes the same year. Unemployment insurance program is authorized by the act.
1919	California Legislature passes Criminal Syndicalism Act, on the books until 1968, providing sweeping anti-union powers to law enforcement agencies; California teacher union locals form the California State Federation of Teachers.	1936	The Anti Strikebreaker Act makes it unlawful to bring in strikebreakers from outside the state; the Public Contracts Act establishes a minimum wage, the eight hours a day and a 40 hours week on government contracts. Includes child and convict labor provisions, health and safety requirements; the Executive Council of the American Federation of Labor votes to expel all
1920	John L. Lewis is elected president of the United Mine Workers of America, at the age of 40, taking control of the largest labor union in the nation.		
1921	U.S. Supreme Court rules that the Clayton Act does not legalize boycotts and does not protect unions against injunctions against them for restraint of trade.		

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	labor members who claim affiliation with the Congress of Industrial Organizations, or CIO, which is being led by the UMW president John L. Lewis.		successfully pit one group of unions against another; beginning of Red Scare in Hollywood, the state and nation.
1937	California CIO Council formed by several unions disagreeing with AF-of-L focus on craft unionism; CIO unions organize on industrial basis, and are committed to civil rights; 99-day maritime workers strike in California is a sharp contrast to the violence of the 1934 maritime and General Strikes; U.S. Supreme Court rules the National Labor Relations Act constitutional.	1946	Oakland General Strike: California voters reject Proposition 11, which would have created a Fair Employment Practices Act.
1938	Culbert Olsen becomes the first Democrat to be elected Governor in the 20th century in California, with broad support of newly powerful unions; the Fair Labor Standards Act provides for a 25¢ minimum wage and time-and-a-half for hours worked in excess of 40 hours a week; John L. Lewis, seeking to organize steelworkers, secures a labor contract with the president of the world's largest steel company, United States Steel, but the smaller companies that collectively were known as "Little Steel" brutally fought steelworkers. Scores of deaths and injuries occurred as the United Steelworkers of America struck at Little Steel plants across the industrial northeast.	1947	Longest farmworker strike to that time: National Farm Labor Union Local 218, led by Ernesto Galarza, vs. DiGiorgio Fruit Corporation; doesn't end until 1950; the anti-labor Taft-Hartley Act passes over President Harry Truman's veto. It rolls back protections contained in the NLRA for worker militancy.
1939	California Governor Culbert Olsen fulfills campaign promise and frees Tom Mooney	1949	ILWU leaves CIO rather than be ejected for "Communist domination." Ten other CIO unions are kicked out; the Fair Labor Standards Act is amended to prohibit child labor.
1941	Thousands of workers at North American Aviation in southern California go on a wildcat strike, only to have it broken up by federal troops.	1951	California union membership hits all-time peak as percentage of the non-farm labor workforce: 40.8%
1941	Shipyards in Oakland, Richmond, San Francisco, Sausalito and Vallejo employ 240,000 union workers around the clock during World War II; aircraft factories and shipyards in Los Angeles and San Pedro; African-American workers struggle for inclusion in AFL Boilermakers Union.	1953	AFL and CIO unions in California join with community groups to create a coalition for a Fair Employment Practices Act, chaired by Oakland labor and civil rights leader C. L. Dellums.
1943	The Committee on Fair Employment Practices is created by President Roosevelt. The intent is to eliminate discrimination in war industries and in government for reasons of race, creed, color or national origin. This comes about after A. Philip Randolph, of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Cars Porters, makes clear that he will organize a national March on Washington for Jobs & Freedom, unless the Administrations acts on the issue of employment discrimination. Exactly 20 years later, Randolph leads the March on Washington, at which a minister by the name of Martin Luther King gives an address that captivates the nation.	1955	The American Federation of Labor merges with the Congress of Industrial Organizations, to form the AFL-CIO, the world's largest labor federation.
1945	Jurisdictional conflict between IATSE and other unions lead to series of strikes by militant Conference of Studio Unions in Hollywood; studio bosses	1958	California AFL and CIO unions join in grassroots effort to defeat Oakland Tribune publisher William Knowland in his bid for Governor, and to stop Knowland's "Right to Work" Proposition 18; California AFL and CIO unions reunite in the California Labor Federation, AFL-CIO.
		1959	California Governor Edmund G. ("Pat") Brown signs the Fair Employment Practices Act; the national Labor Management Reporting and Disclosure Act becomes law. Protects rights of union members by requiring reporting of union business practices and safeguarding union election procedures.
		1960	ILWU signs Mechanization and Modernization Agreement, which pioneers the tradeoff of members' job security for the employers' right to introduce labor-saving equipment.
		1962	The Manpower Development and Training Act passes, requiring the federal government to deal with unemployment resulting from automation and technological changes. Executive order grants federal employees the right to bargain collectively.
		1963	The Equal Pay Act is signed. It prohibits different

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	wages based upon worker's sex under the Fair Labor Standards Act.		President Ronald Reagan warns the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) that he would fire every member if they struck. They did and he did, resulting in the termination of all 10,000 federal air traffic controllers.
1964	The Civil Rights Act is signed into law. Title VII bars discrimination; The Economic Opportunity Act becomes law, providing work and education programs, loans to low-income farmers, businesses and other community anti-poverty programs.	1983	The Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) establishes local partnership from private and public employers who receive federal funds for job training and employment. Replaced the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA).
1965	United Farm Workers Organizing Committee formed by merger of Cesar Chavez's National Farm Workers Association & the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee, AFL-CIO, during the Delano grape strike in California.	1996	First AFL-CIO sponsored Union Summer, in which hundreds of young activists are trained and then placed with union organizing drives.
1966	Amendments to the Fair Labor Standards Act extend minimum wage protection to 10 million workers previously excluded.	1997	California's Industrial Welfare Commission overturns state regulations for overtime pay after an eight hour day. California workers now only receive time-and-a-half after forty hours work in a week.
1968	California Legislature passes Meyers-Milius-Brown Act, legalizing collective bargaining for public sector workers (except public education), in response to series of actions organized by mostly social workers organized by SEIU; the national Age Discrimination Act becomes effective, making it illegal for employers, union, and employment agencies to discriminate in hiring and discharge against persons 40 to 65 years old.	1998	Voters defeat Proposition 226 in California, known to union members as the "Paycheck Deception Act," which was designed to cripple unions' ability to spend money on politics and legislative action.
1970	Hawaii becomes the first state to allow state and local government employees the right to strike; President Nixon signs the Occupational Safety and Health Act, authorizing the Secretary of Labor to establish safety and health standards at work.	1999	Governor Gray Davis and the state Legislature bring back daily overtime provisions repealed by the Industrial Welfare Commission appointed by former Governor Pete Wilson; southern California home care workers vote to join SEIU, which negotiates a contract covering 74,000 workers, the largest unit brought into the labor movement in fifty years; the AFL-CIO votes to support amnesty and to end employer sanctions for employing immigrants illegally in the country
1974	The Employee Retirement Income Security Act becomes law, regulating all private pension plans and, to a limited extent, private welfare plans.		
1975	Rodda Act passes in California, legalizing collective bargaining for public education employees, after a decade of strikes and organizing by teachers; the Trade Act of 1974 passes. Designed to help workers who lose their jobs because of imports.		
1978	The Age Discrimination in Employment Act is amended, raising compulsory retirement for most workers from 65 to 70. Eliminates age 70 mandatory retirement wage for federal workers; President Jimmy Carter signs the Civil Service Reform Act, providing an independent appeal process, protection against abuse in the merit system and incentive for good and skilled management.		
1981	First Comparable Worth strike in United States, conducted by AFSCME Local 101 in San Jose; women achieve pay equity in city government jobs;		

Courtesy of
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