

## How does a strong union affect my family and me?

How does a strong union affect my family and me, you ask? This is like asking how the invention of the light bulb has impacted New York City! This question falls very short, because strong unions have impacted *every* family in our country in one way or another. To start to unpack this topic, we begin by looking two stories from the past, one tragic, and one heroic.

The year is 1911, and the setting is a sweat shop located in the top floors of the Asch building near a wealthy Manhattan neighborhood. Nearly 500 workers, mostly teenage girls - immigrants looking for a better life - report to their jobs on a Saturday morning. It is the sixth day of their fifty-two-hour work week. Some use the one working elevator in the building to make their way to the eighth floor, but most take one of two staircases in the building. They work in a room packed with sewing machines, people, and highly flammable materials. Once the workers are busy at their tasks, one of the stairways is closed *and locked* to prevent them from stealing. The building does even come close to meeting safety standards of the day. The fire escapes are broken, there is no working sprinkler systems, and there is no limit to the number of occupants allowed on each floor. Three elevators are out of order, and the one hose they have access to is rusted and dry rotted. Once the fire starts, there is no hope for the 146 people who perish in the eighth-floor tinder box - one floor too high for the fire trucks' ladders to reach. Within eighteen minutes, the deadliest workplace disaster in New York City history (prior to 9/11), along with 146 lives previously full of potential, has ended.

The years following this tragedy saw a spike in growth for organized labor. Laws were passed protecting workers and prohibiting child labor. The tense battle between big corporations and labor unions was violently waged during the early to mid-1900s. Public opinion was heavily influenced by newspapers. In 1935, unions achieved a major victory when awarded the right to pass out leaflets at company gates in the National Labor Relations Act. On May 26, 1937, thirty year old Walter Reuther, leader of the United Auto Workers Union (UAW), and several members took full advantage of this victory, combined with Ford Motor Company's loathing of labor advocates. They calmly and peacefully attempted to distribute leaflets to the workers exiting the Ford plant at a pedestrian overpass. The Ford company thugs beat Reuther and his friends senseless. Reporters, knowing trouble was brewing, had swarmed the area. After the beating, the thugs turned on the press and destroyed all films and notes taken at the scene. But one photographer, Scotty Kilpatrick, was able to smuggle out a few photo plates by handing over blanks when he was stopped by the company men. In the weeks that followed, images of the brutality imposed by Ford's men covered the headlines, turning the tide of public opinion in favor of the unions, and workers, like never before.

How do these events from our past influence me, and you, in 2019? Well, I still hear the term "sweatshop" used today in reference to places in China and Mexico. But I do *not* hear the term used much about places in the United States. I know child labor still exists in the world, but my friends and I are protected thanks to the "Fair Labor Standards Act" of 1938. I know when I graduate from college, I can choose to seek out a company that has a strong union representing its employees so that I may have job security and protection from corporate greed. It is not that I have been taught to hate corporation. This would be counterproductive since businesses provide people with work and a means to support themselves. But I do understand that any entity designed to make money will, unchecked, do so at the expense of its workers' welfare. Just like our great nation was created on a system of checks and balances, our labor force and corporate executives need checks and balances as well. Anyone working

in America, or anyone who depends on someone working in America, has reaped the rewards of the hard-earned progress made by strong unions over the past century.

When I hear people bashing unions, I honestly do not understand from where the hate comes. The right to organize - for workers to band together with a common purpose - seems like something that we should all agree is a good thing. Being a union member means that companies cannot divide and intimidate individuals. Each member has the backing and support of all of their union “sisters and brothers” when they demand to be treated fairly and with respect. When there is an unsafe condition, a union member can speak up without fear of being fired. When an individual or a group is treated differently because of their skin color, sex, national origin, disability, or age, they can stand up and say, “It’s not okay and we will not stand for it!” Many of these benefits greatly assist workers who have families. Specifically, unions advocate for paid leave for birth of a new child, illness, and injury. Unions have fought for the best values in our society, and they did so for *all* workers - not just for union members. My dad is proud to tell me that when Dr. Martin Luther King marched for equal rights, the UAW members marched with him, arm in arm. When Mexican farm workers were mistreated, underpaid, injured, and in some cases killed by their employers, unions went there and fought to help organize and protect those workers. I do not think I will ever understand how these values can cause divisiveness or controversy.

On a more direct and personal level, my mother worked as a school teacher for a decade in a public school thirty minutes from our home. She has shared with me that her first year of teaching was tough. She was young and idealistic, and the school where she found a job was struggling with social and economic issues that led to very difficult behavior problems in the classrooms. The administration was in decline, drugs were being sold in the hallways. Students ran the school. Funding was low, and class sizes were high. She struggled to maintain control and maintain any sort of standard for her students. The administration got complaints from parents when she tried to hold kids accountable. Instead of working with her or considering her side, they tried to get her fired for failing to turn in the results of her “TINE” test. She felt like a failure and was completely unsupported, except for the teacher’s union that she had joined without giving it a second thought. They helped her keep her job, and the next year the district hired a strong principal who kept the kids in line and supported the teachers. My mom enjoyed ten years of teaching and had a great rapport with her students, staying late daily to help them learn Algebra and Geometry. In fact, she retired when I was born, and she decided it was time to stay home full time with her family. But, without the support of the union, things could have turned out very differently. After putting herself through college, she may have ended up fired within a year and the entire path of our lives would have been changed.

My dad is a very proud member of the UAW. He works for a local steel mill in our town. For decades he was an “iron worker”. Our family was fortunate to have reaped the benefits of a fair negotiated wage and excellent health care. I was lucky that we could afford for me to take part in gymnastics, basketball, and tennis. I was the neighborhood daredevil on my bicycle, without the requisite coordination. I am pretty sure the trips to the ER alone would have bankrupted us if it weren’t for the solid benefit package the union helped carve out for the workers at my dad’s plant!

About sixteen years ago, my father decided on a whim to run for union treasurer. He won, and his life was forever changed. He has become passionate about his work in a way that most people cannot fathom. He talks about his union “brother and sisters”, and he puts in overtime to serve his

union members. Over the years, my father and his fellow union members have come together to help those in need countless times. When a worker was killed in their plant, they raised money for his widow. They then came together and did major renovations to her home. When one of their union brothers had his leg crushed and was incapacitated, they worked together to put a roof on his house. When a local veteran, suffering from PTSD (who was not a union member) needed a furnace, the union membership raised the money for it. Then they donated their time to install it for him. A year does not go by that my dad and his union sisters and brothers are not advocating for someone in need in our community. They work tirelessly with local organizations like the United Way, YMCA, and our local women's shelter to make our town a better place to live. They have done projects such as cleaning up a local city park in a low-income neighborhood utilizing their own equipment to spread topsoil. They built a pavilion and landscaped the surrounding area for our chapter of PARC. These are just a few of dozens of examples of how the local union membership supports and sustains our community.

I appreciate the opportunity to request assistance for my schooling from one of the strongest organizations in our country, the AFL-CIO. In closing, to answer the question "how does a strong union affect...me?", I would like to say that the union has directly impacted me by fostering a desire to help those in need. I want to pursue a career in the medical field. I hope to become a nurse, nurse practitioner, or physician assistant. From my perspective, helping others is the heart of what it means to be a union member. You help and support each other. And so, I hope to follow the advice of Walter Reuther when he said, "There is no greater calling than to serve your fellow man. There is no greater contribution than to help the weak. There is no greater satisfaction than to have done it well."