



Written by **The Economist** Intelligence Unit

**“The labor movement was the key ingredient to delivering a robust middle class and a social safety net.”**

Jake Rosenfeld, Labor Expert

Beginning May 1st of 1886, more than 300,000 strikers and demonstrators joined forces across the U.S. for a national strike. The workers were advocating for an eight-hour workday at a time when the average workday was an estimated 10 to 11 hours. The size and power of the multi-day, mostly peaceful protest signaled to employers and the nation that an organized push for worker rights was real and growing.

Today that event may be best remembered for the violence that erupted in Chicago’s Haymarket Square, when a crackdown by the city’s police against striking workers escalated to martial law citywide. The unfolding force of the movement has since been preserved in history as the origin of May Day, the international holiday honoring workers around the world.

From a contemporary perspective—in which basic worker rights like an eight-hour workday, safety and health standards in the workplace, a national minimum wage and clear limits on child labor seem obvious—the notion of a world without the advocacy of unions is hard to imagine. “The labor movement was the key ingredient to delivering a robust middle class and a social safety net,” says Jake Rosenfeld, a labor expert and professor of sociology at the University of Washington in St. Louis.

Noting the role of unions in advocating for gains that have created greater security for the most vulnerable segments of the population, Mr. Rosenfeld cites the development of a minimum wage, Medicare and the federal food stamp program. Without such support, “we would have a much flimsier social safety net,” he says.

Indeed, the pressure by organized labor, particularly in the late 19th century and throughout the 20th century, has played a central role in creating a working and social environment that defines many aspects of life today. Not only has the labor movement pushed for specific worker benefits, it has also inspired and expanded the belief in creating a more just society that embraces all working people.

## 6 WAYS UNIONS CHANGED OUR LIVES

8-Hour Workday  
40-Hour Workweek

Holiday, Vacation and  
Overtime Pay

Minimum Wage

Employer-sponsored  
Health Insurance

Workplace Safety  
Improvements

Laws Against Sexual  
Harassment, Discrimination  
and Child Labor

## A world of sharp divisions...

But what if unions had never existed to advocate for workers? Ours would be a world with lower wages and a society even more sharply divided between rich and poor. Workplace protections that minimize on-the-job injuries and death in dangerous environments might never have been put in place and expanded. Hard-fought measures such as employer-provided healthcare coverage and even limits on child labor may never have gained a hearing. Unions provided a voice at the bargaining table for their own members—their influence also improved the position of working people more broadly.

One turning point that ushered in historic progress for workers was the passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act in 1938. This legislation established a national standard of the eight-hour workday and 40-hour workweek. It also introduced a national minimum wage, overtime of time-and-a-half for certain jobs and the prohibition of most employment of minors.

These gains depended on the constant pressure that organized labor exerted, often taking decades to bear fruit. In 1881, at the first convention of the American Federation of Labor, members called on all states “to ban children under 14 from gainful employment”—and some individual states supported this push. But more than a half century passed before federal legislation was enacted that prohibited children under 18 from performing dangerous jobs and those under 16 from working during school hours. Without these laws, adolescents today would find themselves in far more precarious working conditions, particularly when children of needy families might take a job—any job—to help their households.

## ...and less advocacy for a healthy, safe and just society

While many part-time and low-wage workers receive no healthcare or work benefits when they get sick or injured today, a century ago that was the reality for most workers. World War II played a key role in the shift—it was a time when the National Labor War Board had frozen wages and companies faced labor shortages as so many men had gone to war. Union-advocated, employment-based health insurance became a

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Nelson Lichtenstein, Labor Historian

desirable way for businesses to recruit and retain workers, especially as it qualifies as tax-exempt compensation—a benefit that continues under the U.S. tax code.

Without the economic and political pressure of unions, many of the rights and regulations of our contemporary world that make life more livable and fair might never have taken root. This includes everything from paid holidays and vacation time to support for Americans with disabilities and those in need of family, medical and military leave to laws against sexual harassment and discrimination and to standards for workplace safety and health.

Labor unions and their social and political involvement have contributed to a more robust democracy in the U.S. by providing a channel for workers’ voices to be heard and their concerns addressed, explains Nelson Lichtenstein, a labor historian and history professor at the University of California Santa Barbara. “For more than a century, an organized working class has been a necessary condition for the existence of democracy.” It has also spurred greater equality of wages within the working class, support for civil rights and acceptance of a more integrated, multicultural society. In turn, Mr. Lichtenstein notes that the decline of unions has paralleled a rise in income inequality, a decline in voting and the rise of a less engaged civic life.

While questions of income inequality and fairness have come to the forefront of our current national conversation, it is challenging to envisage the modern world—and the very existence of the middle class—without the fruitful gains won by the labor movement. Even so, it is clear that the perseverance of unions has laid the foundation of working life in the U.S., and unions’ far-reaching legacy is reflected in the progress and prosperity of various facets of American society.

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