“Education is the golden key that unlocks the potential for human growth”

Walter P. Reuther

THIS UNION CAUSE
An Illustrated History of Labor Unions in America
Introduction

The UAW first published *This Union Cause* in 1963 to share the inspiring stories of America’s working people who struggled in solidarity for fair wages, hours and working conditions.

This booklet has been updated and reprinted to remind us of the blood, sweat and tears so many men, women and children shed to pave the way for workplace protections that we sometimes take for granted today and are being targeted for erosion at this very minute.

The short, but inspiring stories you are about to read begin in our nation’s colonial period and end 200 years later with the victory of the New Deal that established union collective representation and bargaining rights. These rights were – and continue to be – essential to improving the standard of living for millions of Americans and creating, preserving and expanding our nation’s middle class.

The booklet’s title is based on a quote by William H. Sylvis who served as president of the first National Labor Congress established in 1866. Sylvis said that he devoted his life to worker organizing “because I love this union cause more dearly than life itself.” That sentiment is certainly shared by so many today as we work for workplace fairness and respect in the 21st century.
The booklet’s illustrations are photos of oil paintings by Detroit artist John Zygmund Gelsavage (1909-1988). Much of Gelsavage’s art focused on Detroit’s less fortunate and he had a major opportunity to use his artistic talents when the UAW commissioned him to paint highlights of labor’s story in a series of oil paintings. Key figures depicted in the oil paintings are noted throughout this booklet’s text.

The stories explaining Gelsavage’s art tell of the fight to end child labor and slavery, and to mandate free public education, a minimum wage, the eight-hour workday, the 40-hour workweek, unemployment insurance, Social Security, and so many programs that have provided millions of Americans a dignified and secure existence not known to the ancestors who fought – and even died – so that we could have a better life.

When you read these stories of worker determination, pain, and creativity in the fight for workplace respect and a just society, you will become even more convinced of their direct connection to the struggles and challenges working people face and fight today.

We hope this booklet’s brief but effective stories provide some insight into the history of America’s working men, women and children so that we can do our part in labor’s story and paint our own pictures of a brighter future for everyone in “this union cause.”

In solidarity,

UAW EDUCATION DEPARTMENT
The Colonial Days

**INDENTURED SERVANTS** shown disembarking from a ship from England were one of three main sources of labor in America in the 1600s. The other two sources were prisoners and slaves. To be indentured meant that you agreed to repay the cost of your passage to America by working without pay for years wholly under the control of your master employer. The demand for able-bodied workers was so great in Colonial America that merchants’ agents scoured Europe offering glowing promises to persuade people to travel to America under indentured conditions. Those false promises, coupled with an anxious desire to escape poverty, led thousands to enter indentured servitude – a harsh existence of exhausting labor, a meager diet, movement restricted to the workplace, and terms of servitude extended for even the pettiest of claimed offenses. Protests against this inhuman system of hire grew, but it would be decades before indenture disappeared as a way of life for many American workers.
Early Social Conditions

LONG, BODY-WRECKING HOURS at machines in filthy mills were all factory workers could look forward to in the early 19th century in America. The workweek was six days “from sun-up to sundown,” usually 75 hours in the winter and 82 hours in the summer. Fifty-eight percent of northern cotton mill workers were women, while 7 percent were children under 12. Leisure was frowned on; education, if any, came through charity. Adding to these shameful conditions were debtors’ prisons for those who could not pay even the smallest amounts owed. At least 75,000 people were thrown into disease-ridden jails every year for owing paltry debts, including 18 Massachusetts citizens who owed a combined $155! A shorter work-week, an end debtors’ prisons and institution of free public education seemed out of reach, but many workers were determined to create a less wretched life for themselves and a brighter future for their children.
CORDWAINERS were journeyman shoemakers, some of whom came together in the early 1800s to form a fledgling union. Employers were not pleased and turned to the courts to file “criminal conspiracy” lawsuits. Between 1806 and 1815, the Cordwainers were tried six times for “combining unlawfully” to raise their wages. Although there were no U.S. laws forbidding workers from forming associations, prosecutions were based on adopted English common law. The Cordwainers’ defense attorneys argued that the union’s association rights were protected under the U.S. Constitution’s First Amendment, but their efforts were in vain. Cordwainers and others who formed worker unions were always found guilty. It was not until 1842 that the courts held that “conspiracy” indictments violated the U.S. Constitution’s First Amendment. Employers and sympathetic judges later found another way to thwart worker efforts to join together – the injunction. But these legal maneuvers could not stop workers from organizing and civic engagement.
WORKINGMEN’S POLITICAL PARTIES began with the establishment of the Mechanics’ Union of Trade Associations in Philadelphia. The movement soon spread to a dozen other states in New England and as far west as Ohio. For a short time, workingmen’s political parties were highly influential, either electing their own candidates or holding power in local elections with the major political parties. With the rise of President Andrew Jackson, many of workingmen’s political parties’ goals were absorbed by the Democratic Party so that by the late 1830s, workingmen’s parties had largely disappeared. Nevertheless, labor had won political recognition and a stage from which to make its demands for all Americans and advanced some of its goals. For instance, in 1840 President Martin Van Buren issued an executive order establishing the 10-hour workday on federal government projects. However, free public education continued to be an unfulfilled demand and the shameful institution of slavery continued.
THOUSANDS OF AFRICANS were forced from their homeland and sold into slavery from the earliest days of America’s development with the arrival of slaves for sale in Jamestown in 1619. The despicable practice continued under the British and through the establishment of the United States. Black people were subject to sale at auction like chattel until the end of the Civil War. By 1850, there were at least 4 million slaves in the United States. On this foundation of misery, the South had erected an agricultural economy fueled by a few thousand rich and politically powerful white slave owners. Slavery’s opponents established a secret network of safe houses called the Underground Railroad through which an estimated 100,000 slaves escaped to Northern “free” states and Canada. Resentment against slavery grew in 1859 when abolitionist John Brown tried to launch a slave revolt by capturing a federal arsenal at Harper’s Ferry, Virginia. Brown failed and was hanged. Soon thereafter, Civil War between the agricultural South and the industrial North began, tearing America in two as the legal system of slavery was about to topple.
A New Birth of Freedom

**THE CIVIL WAR** brought an end to slavery with President Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation. Nevertheless, this new era created economic crisis for workers. War profiteering that enriched the manufacturer triggered inflation that cut deeply into the lower, relatively fixed incomes of wage earners. By 1863, tightly knit groups of workers were striking to protest this injustice. President Lincoln’s policy generally was to avoid using government force to break strikes, saying, “Labor is the superior of capital and deserves much the higher consideration.” Bolstered by support from the President of the United States, the number of workers forming trade unions rose rapidly, with an estimated 200,000 union members forming 270 unions by 1864, up from only 79 unions in 1863. The workers’ instinct to join together for mutual aid and protection was moving forward when a new dynamic would impact that growth – rising immigration.
MILLIONS OF IMMIGRANTS streamed into America in the late 1800s. Fleeing poverty and oppression in Europe, they came filled with dreams. But “the streets of gold” immigrants thought awaited them were instead crowded, dirty slums in New York, Boston, Chicago and Philadelphia where a dozen or more people might live in one tenement room. The “land of opportunity” these immigrants thought they would find turned out to be a land of sweatshops that paid wages as low as $2 a week for laborers and $11 a week for the highly skilled. Still, immigrant workers filled steel mills, lumber camps, coal mines and garment factories where they toiled 14 to 16 hours a day. Gradually, these stifling conditions drew protests from the immigrants who gravitated to the growing American labor organizations which they invigorated with their demands for a better life that included higher education for their children.
HIGH EDUCATION opportunities for some workers’ children finally began to take shape in 1862 with the passage of the Morrill Act, which allocated federal land grants to establish state universities. In 1866, the first National Labor Congress in the United States convened, led by its president William H. Sylvis (lower left in the illustration). Sylvis had spent his entire adult life organizing iron moulders into what was then the largest union because, he said, “I love this union cause more dearly than life itself.” The National Labor Congress’ growth reflected the entire nation’s expansion. The Homestead Act sent settlers westward in wagons, soon to be followed by others in puffing locomotives on rails spanning the United States from coast to coast. Back east, financiers forged giant corporations and trusts in the basic industries. Workers found themselves insignificant cogs in these corporations, toiling for employers they never saw. A new and growing industrial era called for a new kind of union. Among the first to try to build an industrial union were the coal miners.
LIFE WAS HARD in the Pennsylvania coalfields. Boys sent into the mines before they were 10 were old by the age of 14. Such misery led miners to form a union that was smashed in 1874 during a strike broken by strikebreakers who were escorted into the mines by troops and Pinkerton private police at the company’s direction. The owner-generated violence that resulted, preventing the miners from openly organizing, forced them to create the secret “Molly Maguires.” The miners’ organizing efforts were broken when a Pinkerton spy who infiltrated their ranks betrayed the “Mollies.” Ten “Mollies” were hanged based on evidence later proved false. Nevertheless, the owners’ goal was achieved: to prevent immediate organization of an effective miners’ union. By 1908, the United Mine Workers, led by John Mitchell, would reach a membership of 300,000, an amazing achievement for that era. But in the 1880s, the future of America’s workers seemed to lie with an organization known as the Knights of Labor.
“UNIVERSAL BROTHERHOOD” was the creed of the Knights of Labor, formed in 1869 as a union for all trades. Within just 15 years, the Knights attracted 700,000 members led by Frank J. Farrell, Terence V. Powderly and Fitzhugh Lee (shown upper left in the illustration above). One of the Knights’ aims was to establish an eight-hour work day. The Knights had already begun to decline when armed strikebreakers killed four workers locked out of McCormick’s International Harvester plant in Chicago on May 3, 1886. At a peaceful protest the next day in Haymarket Square, an unknown person threw a bomb into the crowd, killing seven police officers and at least four civilians, wounding countless others. Newspapers supported corporate interests and reporting whipped up public hysteria against the “Haymarket anarchists.” A trial ensued. Four were hanged. Six years later the workers’ innocence was revealed, but too late for the executed and for the Knights who in the face of public disfavor dwindled away. Their major successor was to be the American Federation of Labor.
A CARPENTER AND A CIGARMAKER were behind two significant events for working people: establishment of the American Federation of Labor and Labor Day. The carpenter was Peter J. McGuire of New York (upper left in the illustration) who suggested setting aside the first Monday of September as Labor Day. The first Labor Day observance in 1882 was celebrated with a huge parade in New York City. The cigarmaker was Samuel Gompers, who became labor’s foremost spokesman for over 30 years. An immigrant from England, Gompers went to work at the age of 13 in a cigar factory, where he gleaned much of his early learning from the union’s practice of reading aloud to workers on the job (upper right in the illustration). When the AFL formally launched in 1886, Gompers was elected its first president, a post he held until his death in 1923. The cause of unionism was rising when the government intervention in the 1894 Pullman strike broke a union.
The Pullman Strike

**The Pullman Strike** of 1894 was the first time the federal government used an injunction to break a strike. The story began when newly organized American Railway Union (ARU) members walked off the job when their employer, sleeping car manufacturer Pullman Palace Car Company, cut their pay without reducing rent in their company-owned housing. Led by Eugene V. Debs (upper right in the illustration), the workers demanded that the dispute be arbitrated. When Pullman refused, the workers called for a boycott of all railroads that used Pullman cars. To stop the massive, nationwide strike and boycott, U.S. Attorney General Richard Olney (a former railroad company lawyer) sought and won a federal injunction, while President Grover Cleveland authorized use of the American cavalry and thousands of federal deputies to enforce the injunction nationwide. In the end, 30 strikers were killed and 57 were wounded. Debs was indicted and defended in court by famed attorney Clarence Darrow (lower left in the illustration). Debs would serve six months in prison. Although the strike and ARU were broken, workers continued to support their union cause.
Women at Work

**WOMEN’S UNION ACTIVITY** dates back to 1833 when woman shoe binders in Lynn, Mass. formed a Female Society to protect their wages. They showed their solidarity by striking in 1840 (upper left in the illustration). Women made great contributions in the defense industry starting during the Civil War when they filled cartridges in the Watertown, Massachusetts Arsenal (upper right in the illustration) and continuing through World War II as “Rosie the Riveters” performing industrial jobs (lower left in the illustration). Legendary labor and community activist Mary Harris “Mother” Jones (1837-1930) appears lower right in the illustration. After losing her husband and children to yellow fever in 1867 and her dress shop in 1871’s Great Chicago Fire, Mother Jones began working as an organizer for the Knights of Labor and United Mine Workers. To the end of her life, Mother Jones was an inspiration to thousands of striking workers and their families. She is most remembered for urging working people to “Pray for the dead and fight like hell for the living.”
The Seamen’s Fight

FOR CENTURIES, LIFE AT SEA was bleak and hopeless for seamen. Often forced into service and branded as troublemakers if they protested and struck, seamen were at the mercy of their employers. Their life was aptly described by one of their legendary union leaders, Andrew Furuseth (upper left in the illustration), who said, when threatened with jail during a strike, “They cannot put me in a smaller room than I have always lived in. They cannot give me a plainer food than I have always eaten. They cannot make me lonelier than I have always been.” Effective seaman organizing began in 1878 with formation of the Lake Seamen’s Union, later consolidated with other groups to form the International Seamen’s Union in 1895. Another milestone in the seamen’s fight for justice was passage of the Seamen’s Act of 1915, known as the “Magna Carta of the Sea.” Among other things, the Act limited working hours at sea to 56 hours a week.
THE MESSAGE OF THE INDUSTRIAL WORKERS OF THE WORLD was spread through periodicals, pamphlets, poems and songs like IWW co-founder Ralph Chaplin’s “Solidarity Forever.” Founded in Chicago in 1905, the IWW promoted the message that “an injury to one is an injury to all.” The IWW’s main objective was to organize workers into “one big union.” This approach was in contrast to the AFL’s union model which organized workers along jurisdictional craft lines. Depicted in the illustration above are IWW members who were involved in historic strikes, trials and fights for freedom of speech: “Big Bill” Haywood (upper left), Elizabeth Gurley Flynn (center), Joe Ettor and Arturo Giovannitti (upper right) and Joe Hill (left).
THE COAL AND IRON POLICE was a private security force existing between 1865 and 1931. The Pennsylvania General Assembly authorized it at the request of iron and coal companies to control and break union organizing and strike activity in Pennsylvania. Overseen by the notorious Pinkerton Detective Agency, the Coal and Iron Police terrorized workers in impoverished steel towns in the early 1900s. Steelworker wages were pitifully low for an average 69-hour workweek. By 1918, an organizing drive began with 100,000 steelworkers joining a union that year. When steel industry giant U.S. Steel Corporation ignored worker demands to collectively bargain and began to harass workers, workers struck in nine states in what became known as the Steel Strike of 1919. Hundreds of workers were brutalized or jailed and in Gary, Ind. 18 workers were killed. By 1920, the strike was crushed and workers returned to work. The strike’s devastation would result in little steel organizing until the 1930s. Nevertheless, workers persevered through the 1920s and 1930s with some friends in Congress to help advance the cause of workers’ rights.
**Friends of Workers**

Organized Labor’s Friends in the 1920s and 1930s included progressive Wisconsin Senator Robert M. LaFollette (upper right in the illustration). LaFollette’s efforts to champion worker-friendly legislation earned him labor’s endorsement when he ran for U.S. President in 1924 on an independent ticket. Another stalwart liberal was Nebraska Senator George W. Norris (lower right in the illustration). A Republican, Norris was often attacked by his own party for developing such projects as the Tennessee Valley Authority and the anti-injunction act he co-sponsored and helped pass in 1932 with Fiorello LaGuardia (lower left in the illustration), then a Congressman, later New York City mayor. The Norris-LaGuardia Act barred federal courts from issuing injunctions to break peaceful labor activity and protected worker freedom of association rights. In this era, membership in the AFL, led by William Green (upper left in the illustration), rose from 3 million to 8 million.
The Depression of the 1930’s

BREADLINES symbolized the Great Depression which devastated the U.S. economy after the October 1929 stock market crash. By 1933, nearly 14 million workers - one out of three - were unemployed. Industrial production dropped over 50 percent. Jobless men sold apples on street corners. Millions evicted from their homes lived in clusters of shacks named Hoovervilles after sitting President Herbert Hoover (upper right in the illustration), whose conservative policies failed to halt the nation’s downward spiral. World War I veterans formed the Bonus Army and marched on Washington with their families and allies to plead for early payment of funds that they were entitled to in the future, only to be shot at and driven away by police. By 1932, nearly 20 million people were on public relief. President Hoover’s slogan “prosperity is just around the corner” did not restore public confidence. The Depression just got worse. It was in this environment that new hope grew for millions of industrial workers with the formation of the Committee (later Congress) of Industrial Organizations (CIO).
Organizing Industrial Workers

THE COMMITTEE (LATER CONGRESS) OF INDUSTRIAL WORKERS WAS FORMED on November 9, 1935 to address the needs of millions of industrial workers who were not part of the AFL’s organizing efforts which centered on skilled craftsmen. Disagreement over the AFL’s strategy led eight leaders of its affiliated international unions to form the CIO which would organize nearly 4 million workers in its first two years. Workers in such industries as steel, auto, rubber and textiles came together to win fair pay, job security and respect. Among early CIO leaders were (top row in the illustration) Max Zaritsky, hatters’ union; Charles P. Howard, typographers; first CIO president John L. Lewis, coal miners; David Dubinsky, ladies’ garment workers; Harvey C. Fremming, oil workers; (bottom row of the illustration) Sidney Hillman, clothing workers; Thomas F. McMahon, textile workers, and Thomas H. Brown, mine and mill workers. Famed columnist Heywood Broun (lower left of the illustration) organized the Newspaper Guild.
The Reuther Brothers

WHEN THE CIO began its new industrial unionism strategy in the 1930’s, three remarkable brothers came to the fore to help unionize the key American auto industry: Walter P. Reuther (1907-1970), Roy L. Reuther (1909-1968), and Victor G. Reuther (1911-2004). The Reuther children were raised by their parents, Valentine and Anna, in a family atmosphere of unionism and liberal thought. Valentine arrived in Wheeling, West Virginia from Germany as a child and was one of the nation’s youngest labor leaders at age 23. He taught his children that working people have a right to human dignity, security and equality, and that life’s greatest satisfaction lies in serving mankind. Imbued with this philosophy, the three Reuther brothers focused on organizing auto workers into the UAW and helping them win a better life at the bargaining table and through the ballot box. Crucial in the auto workers’ struggle for justice was the dramatic sitdown strike at General Motors.
The Sitdown Strike

**THE SITDOWN STRIKE** was an effective and empowering organizing method used by the UAW to win recognition from the auto industry’s leading firm General Motors. When workers sat down for 44 days at Fisher Body’s Plant #1 in Flint, Michigan from December 1936 to January 1937, what could have been a bloody episode in American history was averted by Michigan Governor Frank Murphy (upper right in the illustration with the CIO’s John L. Lewis). Instead of ordering the Michigan National Guard to drive out striking workers at gunpoint, Murphy used the troops to maintain peace. GM recognized the UAW as its workers’ union on February 11, 1937, spurring thousands more to join. Membership mushroomed from 30,000 in the spring of 1936 to 10 times that within 15 months. Eventually, the UAW would have over 1 million members and become a collective bargaining leader, pioneering contracts providing for pensions, cost-of-living increases and supplemental unemployment benefits. But gaining these wins did not mean the fight for worker dignity was won.
THE BATTLE OF THE OVERPASS was a defining moment in the UAW’s campaign to organize Ford workers. It occurred on May 26, 1937, revealing to the public the company’s undisguised brutality against its workers. Led by Walter Reuther, the battle began after 50 trade unionists tried to distribute organizing handbills to Ford workers at an overpass outside Ford’s huge Dearborn, Michigan Rouge plant. There, the organizers were suddenly and savagely rushed by a band of armed Ford “service” men, led by the nefarious Harry Bennett. When the unprovoked assault stopped, one organizer had suffered a broken back, one had sustained a skull fracture, and nearly all had bloodied noses. This legendary episode in UAW and labor history highlights the sacrifices Ford workers made to fight for workplace dignity and fair pay. Three years after the Battle of the Overpass, Ford would recognize the UAW and negotiate a bargaining agreement containing provisions we take for granted today, including seniority rights, a grievance procedure and paid vacation – with the promise of more gains to come.
A MEMORIAL DAY MASSACRE that left 10 dead and more than 100 wounded horrified the nation in 1937. The gunmen were police officers. The victims were demonstrators headed to Republic Steel’s South Chicago, Ill. plant to picket for union recognition. Led by Philip Murray (who would become a CIO president), the CIO Steel Workers Organizing Committee was trying to persuade Republic and other “little steel” companies to recognize the union. At the time, there were 22,000 workers from Chicago steel plants on strike. Testimony and investigations after the massacre revealed that the police had used excessive force and planned the mayhem. A newsreel team filming the events captured most of the massacre. A Senate investigation followed revealing Republic’s complicity in the violence to thwart the workers’ protected organizing rights.
A SENATE COMMITTEE led by Wisconsin Senator Robert M. LaFollette Jr. (lower left in the illustration) investigated the Memorial Day Massacre and other violations of workers’ civil liberties. The committee’s concluding report shocked the nation, revealing that thousands of “respected” corporations had hired labor spies to thwart worker union organization. The investigation also revealed that companies – including General Motors – had spent over $9 million for firearms, spies and strikebreakers in callous indifference to worker rights protected by the National Labor Relations Act – or Wagner Act – signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt just two years before (upper right in the illustration). The Wagner Act, often called “Labor’s Magna Carta,” provided, among other things, secret ballot elections for workers choosing their union (upper left in the illustration). The early worker struggles for employer compliance with the Wagner Act led to relatively stable industrial relations through World War II and into the post-war years. Workers made many gains during this period.
UNION MEMBERSHIP and employer recognition of the UAW as the workers’ representative meant recognizing the worker as a person and citizen who had a voice on and off the job. Before the union, workers were alone, without an organized process to address management decisions. Now, with union representation, workers were organized in common purpose and at the bargaining table with the leverage to negotiate a labor contract that could lift them and their family, impacting the entire community. Gains in pay, job security and workplace dignity spurred the same gains by workers everywhere – organized and unorganized. The illustration above tells the story of UAW member gains in the long struggle for social and economic justice. Arbitration, survivor benefits, bereavement pay, and tuition support are examples of these historic gains. By successfully using its leverage at the bargaining table and the ballot box, the UAW has benefitted entire communities by setting pay standards and advancing strong public policy initiatives.
TODAY’S CHILDREN ARE TOMORROW’S WORKERS. What kind of future do they face? What kind of world will they inherit? This illustration shows children of all races and nationalities holding hands and participating in a dance of harmony, hope and happiness. They are playing in an ideal world of “Bread, Peace and Freedom” This was the motto of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (now International Trade Union Confederation) at its founding congress in 1949. The UAW is a member of this global labor federation of 176 million workers, as well as IndustriALL, another global labor federation of over 50 million workers. International labor relationships further our efforts to forge democratic ideals across the globe – worker to worker – in a spirit of cultural and educational understanding. Together, we strive to coordinate and harmonize our goals to more effectively ensure fair labor standards and a decent standard of living for all workers. Together, we embrace “this union cause” to pass on to future generations.
This Union Cause is also the title of a 23-minute film that was created to accompany the original version of this booklet. It is a fascinating telling of the labor history stories in this booklet and has been converted to DVD for today’s viewer.

The DVD and copies of this booklet can be purchased from the UAW Purchasing and Supply Department, 8000 E. Jefferson Ave., Detroit, MI 48214.