

Organizing labor

Workers in Iowa history have joined forces and demanded better working conditions and wages.



SHSI (Iowa City)

In the early 1900s, kid laborers in Muscatine formed a union of their own. Some of the members are pictured above.

Imagine that you and your family work for one of the 43 button factories in Muscatine, Iowa in 1911. If you are a boy, you might spend your days in a damp room pulling shells out of a tank of stinky water. Any cuts on your hands or arms are likely to become infected by germs in

the water. You take the shells to a machine that cuts out small circles.

If you are a girl, you might use a machine to polish the circles or cut holes in them to make buttons. The air is dusty from all the shell dust and it's hard to breathe. If your machine

clogs, you have to clean it without turning it off; you may get cut. When you return home at night you sew buttons onto cards. Your pay is based on how many shell circles or buttons you make or how many cards you fill. You can't watch the boss count what you've done

and you suspect you're being cheated. You'd like to complain, but you're afraid you'll be fired and your family really needs the few dollars you earn. What do you do?

You might join the nearly 700 children—including some under the legal working age of 14 years—in the Juvenile Button Sewers' and Carriers' Union.

A union is like a club. Members agree to help each other try to improve the place where they work by sharing their ideas and concerns with their employer.

Printers formed the first trade union at Dubuque in 1855. Their kind of trade union was very exclusive; you couldn't join unless you were a skilled tradesman.

Des Moines miners joined the Knights of Labor in 1878. This national secret organization welcomed all workers regardless of their skill level, nationality, race, or gender. They encouraged the use of arbitration (using an outsider to make a decision after listening to both sides) instead of strikes (refusing to work).

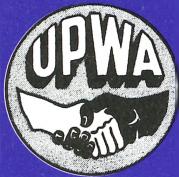


Courtesy Sioux City Public Museum



SHSI (Iowa City)

ABOVE: Until labor laws cracked down on working conditions, Iowa workers had to endure dirty and dangerous work sites. Does this Sioux City meat packing house look safe and clean to you? LEFT: These Muscatine workers are on strike, 1950s.



By 1900, unions used pictures of two hands clasped in a handshake to symbolize solidarity. This 1930s symbol of the United Packing Workers of America shows cooperation between races.

Company owners seldom wanted to listen to workers' ideas. Sometimes they fired union organizers or temporarily closed their plants and then hired replacement workers (sometimes called scabs) to do the union members' jobs. In 1937, the U.S. Supreme Court said that workers have the right to organize themselves into unions as long as they follow certain rules.

Bruce Nolan worked in a Sioux City packing house in the 1930s. He and his friends learned about unions by reading the newspaper. They used direct action to get union recognition. "Thirty-four of us stopped that plant of 1400 workers. We had an agreement that after ten minutes we'd go back to work. We had 34 work stoppages until we was able to

get the company to agree to sit down and talk to us."

A Quad Cities worker who joined a union in 1940 focused on improving working conditions. "Things weren't clean. Lighting was bad. There was no heat. It was terrible working there. We got the union in and the first thing we did was clean the shop up."

Many unions built meeting places where members' families could go to learn or be entertained. They shared stories about their jobs with politicians and encouraged them to pass laws to give workers cleaner and safer working conditions, better pay, more benefits, and fair treatment.

"(We) took the kids out of shops," says a Waterloo union member. "Without the labor movement negotiating for better wages and working conditions two-thirds of the people wouldn't have all the conveniences they've got now. The American people are much healthier now than when I was a kid."

Union membership in Iowa peaked in the 1950s. About half as many eligible workers join

today, partly because companies have moved many traditional union jobs elsewhere. But unions are still needed. Workers who don't have a signed contract with their employer can be fired with or without a reason. Job-related injuries are still possible.

"All workers have the right to be treated with dignity both on and off the job," Mark Smith of the Iowa Federation of Labor told *The Goldfinch*. "Dignity comes from earning enough to provide for your family. It also comes from having some input in the decisions that are made about your working situation. Workers should have the right to ask about conditions that seem unfair, without worrying about losing their jobs."

Jennie Shuck remembers being cold and hungry when her father's Sioux City packing house was on strike. Even so, her advice to workers is, "Get involved, because in numbers there is strength. If you're trying to fight a battle by yourself, it's almost impossible."

The kids in the Muscatine Juvenile Button Sewers' and Carriers' Union would agree. ▲