Early Employment

Chinookan-speaking people had long and successfully labored to tap the area’s abundant natural resources. In 1824, Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) designated Fort Vancouver as the headquarters and agricultural supply depot for its extensive fur-trading operation. The region’s first corporation had two dozen trading posts, six ships, and over six hundred employees. Native Americans throughout this trade network supplied the furs crucial to HBC profits.

Hawaiian labor also became critical to the enterprise. To trade with China, HBC ships stopped in the Hawaiian or “Sandwich” Islands, the 19th century commercial hub of the Pacific. Recognizing a potential workforce, HBC opened an Oahu office in 1829 to recruit Hawaiians into service, with contracts generally lasting for three years. At times exploited, indebted to the company for trade goods, and unable to afford to return to their native Hawaii, the men worked on fur brigades and as sailors, loggers, guides, farmers and cooks. They also staffed the region’s first saw mill, described as "a scene of constant toil. Thirty or forty Sandwich Islanders are felling the pines and dragging them to the mill; sets of hands are plying two gangs of saws by night and day; nine hundred thousand feet per annum are constantly being shipped to foreign ports."

Hawaiian workers often married Native American women, insuring that they renewed their contracts with HBC. Wives also worked for the Company processing salmon, working in the fields, or manufacturing candles and other goods for the stores. At its peak, “The Village” just west of the Fort’s stockade housed up to 1,000 Company French-Canadian, Scottish, Irish, Hawaiian, Native American, and Métis (mixed Native and European heritage) workers and their families.

In 1849, as Fort Vancouver’s primary revenue source shifted from furs to agricultural goods, the percentage of Hawaiian workers increased to a majority of the local HBC workforce—a rank formerly held by French-Canadians. At this time, The Village began to be called “Kanaka Village” or “Kanaka Town.”

After 1846, Oregon Territory became part of the United States and HBC eventually relocated to Victoria, British Columbia in 1859. More whites began settling north of the Columbia River, changing the status of local Hawaiians and Native Americans. Suffering from mistreatment and racial discrimination, and denied land ownership and American citizenship, some Hawaiians moved north to Kalama or to Canada. Others remained in the area, carving out lives for themselves and their families. The U.S. Army burned the remaining worker village in 1860.
Expanding industrial employment lured millions of European immigrants to America, many coming to Washington state to work in agriculture, fishing, mining, and timber industries. Between 1880 and 1890, the number of Washington’s manufacturing workers rose from 1,147 to 20,366, surpassing national trends. Vancouver’s population tripled between 1900 and 1910, growing from 3,126 to 9,300.

The growth in semi-skilled wage workers set the stage for an expanded labor movement. To counter capital’s power, workers were divided over whether to reform the existing economic and political system, or create a new egalitarian society. Washington workers generally sided with more radical groups like the Western Federation of Miners, socialists, anarchists, and Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), which pledged to organize all working people, as well as the more conservative AFL that represented the skilled trades.

Washington workers and their unions joined with farmers and middle-class reformers between 1895 and 1915 to elect populists, progressives, and socialists to legislate reforms such as women’s suffrage, railroad regulation, public ownership of utilities and ports, universal access to education, Labor Day as a school holiday, a workers’ compensation law to protect workers in industrial accidents, limited working hours for women and children, and industrial safety regulations. Camas residents elected a Socialist, O.T. Clark, as mayor from 1916 to 1918. In the first decades of industrial capitalism’s ascendance, many Americans—especially in the Pacific Northwest—believed that alternatives were possible.
Sawdust, Strikes and Strong-Arm Tactics

The period after Reconstruction ended in 1877 was marked by bitter conflicts and violence between large employers and employees. Real wages did not rise between 1890 and 1926 despite the expanding industrial economy. The strike became one of the few defenses workers had to assert grievances, resist employer demands, and compel negotiation. In the 1880s alone, almost 10.000 strikes and lockouts affected industrial production. But workers still faced employers who used strikebreakers, police and militia to crush their efforts.

Workers sought to reduce the work day and improve wages by striking or joining unions. In 1890, workers at the Michigan, Lucia, and W.J. Ross mills went on strike, demanding their hours per day be reduced to eleven while keeping daily wages at $1.75.

In 1913, Crown Willamette Paper Company, the largest employer in Clark County, became the site of a bitter labor struggle when women in the bag factory walked off their jobs demanding higher wages and better working conditions. After three weeks, the strikers settled for a small pay raise and ventilation improvements.

Concerned about the shortage of spruce for airplane production, the federal government sent Colonel Brice P. Disque to resolve the situation. To weaken the IWW, Disque proposed a government-sponsored company union, the Loyal Legion of Loggers and Lumbermen (LLLL or 4Ls), and persuaded timber executives to allow militarization of the industry. In November 1917, Disque organized the Spruce Production Division, part of the Army Signal Corps headquartered at Vancouver Barracks. He also helped establish the eight-hour workday, long a goal for union activists.

Army officers visited lumber camps and mills, administering loyalty oaths to workers, who pledged to "support this country against enemies, both foreign and domestic," in order to retain their employment. 25,000 soldiers joined 85,000 civilian workers. The Spruce Division expelled IWW activists, and even the rival AFL complained that LLLL officers banned them from speaking, broke up union organizing meetings, and ejected them from the camps.

The Spruce Production Division was demobilized on August 31, 1919. The LLLL declined and was terminated in 1938, when a revived labor movement eclipsed unpopular company unions.

As the first World War reduced labor from Europe, and demand for agricultural and manufactured products increased, workers were poised to demand a greater share of profits. Prewar inflation drove up prices while wages stalled. On April 16, 1917, 400 Camas mill workers went on a week-long strike and formed a union, Papermakers No. 100. After granting a token pay raise, mill superintendent William Lewthwaite announced the mill "would not employ union labor." As conditions worsened, workers went on strike again in November, joined by the company's employees at Oregon City. Lewthwaite hired replacement workers to keep up production. By Christmas, the strike had become a futile effort. The WWI crisis stymied labor organizing in Clark County and the rest of the country.

Because of conditions in the Northwest woods, the militant Industrial Workers of the World (IWW or "Wobblies") gained support in the logging camps before World War I. In the summer of 1917, almost 90 percent of loggers walked off the job in support of a shorter work week and improved conditions. At the time, this was the largest series of strikes in Washington State history. Because of war demands on production, government and company officials branded union strikers as subversive and un-American. Although they returned to work in September, the loggers continued a work slow-down.
Changes and Challenges

America’s entry into the first World War in 1917 created new opportunities for some workers (including women) and near full employment as industries filled both war orders and positions left open by departing servicemen. Most American workers and many of their unions were openly against the war, although by 1917, AFL head Samuel Gompers supported President Wilson’s war aims in order to win more respectability for the labor movement.

During World War I, organized workers used strikes as never before, revealing their position of power in a period of high labor demand. But by the 1920s, the labor movement seemed to stall.

The war had changed the country and the region. By 1920, the majority of Americans lived in cities and worked for employers rather than for themselves. After many decades of struggle, almost half of American workers had won the 48-hour work week.

But wartime strikes in the Pacific Northwest had led to unprecedented repression, which continued to curtail labor militancy after the war. American employers and the government were determined to prevent a Bolshevik revolution on American soil, and targeted the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW or “Wobblies”) and other radical groups. Yet as 1919 opened, 65,000 organized workers in Seattle launched a general strike that shut down the city for a week. Across the country, over four million workers participated in strikes that year, a number not matched again until 1946. States such as Washington fought back to crush such militancy.

In 1920, the State Supreme Court upheld Washington’s criminal-syndicalism law, which made it illegal to advocate sabotage or violence as a means of accomplishing political or industrial reform, making it easier to prosecute Wobblies. In December 1921, Clark County tried and convicted IWW workers it claimed were in violation of the “criminal syndicalism” act.

Although Clark County’s population grew modestly in the 1920s, its labor unions suffered. Postwar shipyard closures, prohibition, overproduction and falling prices curtailed both employment and union influence, and hurt local industries such as timber and agriculture.

In 1922, the Longshoremens’ Union protested rates paid by the Vancouver municipal dock, claiming 25 cents an hour for unloading lumber cars was unacceptable. That July, railroad shop workers went on strike in Portland, although The Oregonian claimed there was little effect on Union Pacific, Southern Pacific, and Spokane, Portland and Seattle railroad shops. In August, Vancouver’s Mayor Kiggins promised to use city funds to support a movie theaters to families of needy railroad “carmen” strikers since there “may be distress among them.”

In 1921, seventeen Vancouver-based unions still represented local workers. By 1928, only five remained. In 1934, as the economy worsened, only three unions still called Vancouver home.
Depression, New Deal, New Dawn

President Franklin D. Roosevelt's solution to the Great Depression's "underconsumption" problem was to allow a new union movement to push wages upward. The National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) of 1933 gave workers the right to join unions. Former unionists worked to rebuild old unions and create new ones. In Washington State, the Communist Party and the Unemployed Citizens League mobilized workers and the unemployed. In 1934, organizing campaigns and major strikes led to union recognition, contracts, and clout.

One of the most important strikes of the decade began May 9, 1934, when Vancouver longshoremen joined their West Coast counterparts in a walkout that shut down trade for 83 days. Their success inspired a wave of organizing and strikes in the Pacific Northwest among Teamsters and loggers, as well as sawmill, maritime, cannery, and other workers.

Clark County workers’ demands for unionization spread like wildfire. A new paper, The Clark County Union, noted that "within a year nearly 4,000 workers have become affiliated with organized labor." Optimistic about the future, the publication reported on successes such as the Washington Textile Workers organizing at Washougal Woolen Mill and the Retail Clerks contract victory.

In 1935, the National Labor Relations (or Wagner) Act reaffirmed the NIRA and added more rights for workers and unions, including restricting retaliation against workers who tried to organize, negotiate, or strike. That year, John L. Lewis, president of the United Mine Workers, asked the AFL to develop a new strategy to organize unskilled industrial workers. Despite AFL resistance, the UMWA and others launched what became the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in 1938, a labor federation dedicated to industrial organizing. The CIO organized thousands of Northwest workers, making the region one of the most unionized in the nation.

Over the next few years, almost every Clark County occupation saw the value in organizing unions. The Auto Mechanics Union signed all garages to a union agreement. Egg and Poultry Workers, Office Employees, and Laundry Workers also organized unions. In 1936, 400 California Cannery workers met at the Eagles Hall to form the AFL Cannery Workers Union, which asked local canneries to raise wages to 40 cents per hour.

The CIO and the AFL represented competing values, and often battled over members. The CIO faulted the AFL for its limited goals and failures to organize workers regardless of skill, gender or race, while the AFL charged that radicals dominated CIO unions. But in Clark County, they often worked together on issues and political campaigns, generally supporting and breathing new life into the Democratic Party.

The federal government’s “New Deal” launched new agencies and construction projects in 1933 aimed at putting millions of unemployed men and women to work during the Depression. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) created in 1935 provided jobs to men and women who built bridges, repaired roads, sewed mattresses, and more. By 1937, WPA projects in Clark and Skamania Counties employed over 1,200 workers. The Workers Alliance, WPA’s union, organized a statewide walkout to force the WPA to bargain and to require contractors to pay prevailing wage.

By the end of the decade, Clark County workers had created dozens of unions, improved wages and working conditions, and transformed local culture to support their goals. “Community unionism” garnered support from local businesses and voluntary associations. Workers and their families pledged to buy local, elect sympathetic politicians, and support one another during strikes. The Eagles Lodge, known for its support of social issues such as workers’ compensation, old age and mother’s pensions, was established in Vancouver with 100 charter members.

On February 2, 1935, a fight broke out in the Pit Café between members of the Teamsters and Brewery Workers unions, leaving the restaurant damaged, two men hospitalized, and three of the Arts Building, including the Pit café and bar, where local workers gathered. Tensions Vancouver’s Star Brewery, which operated from 1856 until state prohibition closed it in 1916, United Brewery, Flour, Cereal and Soft Drink Workers of Portland and Vancouver contested the County Central Labor Council supported them, and Burchfield argued not to serve “unfair” (Teamster-produced) beer at the Pit, setting the stage for the brawl.
Of War and Women

On the eve of World War II, the labor movement was stronger and enjoyed more legitimacy than at any time before or since. Americans believed democracy not only depended on the right to vote, but on the right to have a voice in the workplace. When the war started, more workers unionized while flocking to industrial jobs. The War Manpower Commission compelled employers and unions to diversify their workforce, allowing women and minorities to gain access to wartime industrial jobs.

World War II brought an economic boom to the Northwest. Attracted by cheap power from Columbia River dams, Alcoa opened an aluminum plant in Vancouver on September 2, 1940, hiring 500 workers to "pour the first aluminum made west of the Mississippi." Six local unions represented workers, including the Aluminum Council (AFL) and the semiskilled potroom employees' Aluminum Workers of America (CIO).

Kaiser Shipyards recruited locally and throughout the South. At its peak in 1943, the shipyards employed almost 40,000 women. Sometimes working seven days a week, female industrial workers faced challenges with housing, childcare, and homemaking. These women often relied on relatives or neighbors to look after children. Kaiser created Vanport, a wartime housing project between Vancouver and Portland, and established two child care centers that could care for 1,000 children each. But even with these innovations, there were still mothers with little or no childcare help.

A 1943 article in the Kaiser Shipyards' magazine Bo'ni' Whistle, put it simply: "Whether the general public approves or not, no matter how much the men shout that 'the woman's place is in the home,' the fact is that for a growing number of Portland and Vancouver women, their place is in the shipyard."

The lure of men's wages drew women outside the home and from traditionally female jobs. In Vancouver, a teacher made 75 cents an hour--she could earn $1.25 an hour in the shipyards. Alice Erikson, who began as a tack welder and went on to become the Kaiser Shipyards' first female driller said, "I needed to work and that was the best paying work I could get, so naturally I took it."

The paper mill in Camas also recruited nationally to fill positions vacated by enlisted men, but gave preference to local women. By 1943, women made up 30% of the mill's workforce, producing rudders, cranes, and other wartime materials. Over time, women were moved to divisions formerly operated by men and worked as machinists, balemen, pressmen, operators, testers, and roll winders. Crown Zellerbach appealed for "girls to work even half-shift, who might possibly be working the same at another factory or in the shipyards." In June 1942, concerns about women's wages lowering men's prompted the union to negotiate incremental pay increases of 2 1/2 cents every two months until women received the full scale.

In late 1944, the War Manpower Commission stopped trying to recruit women and started advocating that they return to their homes and take care of their families, illustrating how temporary "flexible gender roles" were. When the war ended and servicemen returned home, many women remained in the workforce, but mainly in sex-segregated jobs.

Vancouver's rapid wartime growth presented a dilemma as it struggled to provide essential services: how to expand fire protection as firefighters left for the military or war production jobs. Fire Chief Pierre Dufay stopped the loss by convincing the city council to raise their pay. On November 13, 1942, it took over three hours to defuse a fire engulfing the Hudson House apartments, leading to the most fire-related fatalities in Vancouver's history. Forty workers and seven lost their lives. Station 4 opened August 18, 1943 in Dormitory 2900 of the Kaiser Shipyards, and Station 5 next to the Vancouver Housing Authority's developments. By the end of the war in 1945, the city's original seventeen firefighters had expanded to fifty members.
Postwar Power

At the end of World War II, Clark County workers were both worried and optimistic. Many feared big employers like Kaiser Shipyards would close, and returning servicemen would swell the ranks of the unemployed. Counting on their continued strength, Vancouver unions announced the construction of a new Labor Temple on the corner of Broadway and 11th Street in November 1945.

Emboldened and addressing wartime wage freezes and inflation, workers launched an unprecedented number of strikes throughout the nation. In 1945, a wildcat strike by production workers at the Vancouver Alcoa aluminum plant froze four potlines, resulting in the loss of several million pounds of aluminum. Fear of a strike often prompted negotiations. Alcoa relied on wage increases to ensure stability, going so far as to pre-empt union negotiations by voluntarily offering a 10 percent wage increase in 1950.

Postwar gains in union membership and the economy made the promise of “The American Dream” seem possible to many families. High rates of unionization (about 35 percent nationally) expanded the middle class and led to increases in “family wage” jobs, tax revenues, home ownership, and education. Nonunion employers were compelled to match wage and benefit packages to remain competitive.

The press routinely reported on negotiations and contract victories for local workers. In July 1948, Machinists Local 1374 and Clark County automobile and accessory dealers settled wage contracts after five months of negotiations. The union called in state and federal mediators and ultimately won a 15 cents per hour wage increase for 250 garage men and 60 machinists. In October 1950, Local 809 of the Cannery Workers (later absorbed by Teamsters) voted for a “closed shop” at the Washington Canners Co-op. In June 1964, the Northwest Brewers Association settled a new 3-year contract with Teamsters Local 501 to increase wages by 46 cents an hour, benefitting 110 Lucky Lager employees.

Unions sought to organize their community beyond the workplace by supporting educational and action, collaborating with other area groups to advance progressive causes, developing scholarships, and supporting strikers and their families. In July 1951, labor unions and farm groups pledged to boycott Vancouver grocery stores that sold lower-priced Portland milk. In 1956, local unions mobilized voters to defeat the “right to work” Initiative 198, which would have weakened unions throughout the state.

Unions often pooled their strength, as in the region’s 1953 consolidation into the Central Labor Council of Clark, Skamania and West Klickitat Counties. Ed Barnes remembered that during The Oregonian strike in 1959, the entire IBEW apprenticeship class walked the picket line seven days a week. Barnes approached the contractors and got them “to give us all the copper wire off the job so we could sell it to support the Portland Reporter newspaper [an alternative to The Oregonian].”

But sometimes locals stretched themselves too thin, as when Fire Fighters Local 452 wrote to the Washington State Federation of Labor in 1951 temporarily suspending their membership because of commitments to a half-dozen other labor associations, including the Washington State Council of Firemen and the Clark County Central Labor Council, causing the local to be “fast getting on the red side of the ledger...and at this rate have nothing left for home use.”
Cold War, Communists and West Coast Independence

The Cold War had an immense impact on the American labor movement. The wave of strikes resulting from postwar inflation energized a coalition of conservatives who passed the Taft-Hartley Act over President Truman’s veto in 1947. The act curbed inter-union solidarity and weakened unions’ political and financial strength as it limited strikes, boycotts, secondary and mass picketing, donations to federal political campaigns, and the ability to mandate membership. Taft-Hartley demanded loyalty oaths that led unions to purge their ranks of communists, but from the perspective of American business, any kind of unionism, whether right or left wing, could be portrayed as subversive.

The labor movement feared being branded with the “communist” label. Howard Costigan of the Washington Pension Union (WPU) began hosting a pro-labor radio show in the early 1940s that aired across Washington State, including Aberdeen, Vancouver and Longview. Reflecting the broader anti-labor national trend, these programs disappeared from the air by 1947.

Dale Chambers recalled that his father, Clarence Albert Chambers, president of the International Woodworkers of America (IWA), fought for health and safety issues and made his employer “live by the rules... by not speeding up the work and things like that... And back then there was a big stir that anybody different was a communist. Well my father was not a communist. Never been a member, been loyal to this country and all that.”

The Association of Western Pulp & Paper Workers (AWPPW) has maintained its independence over the years. Dissatisfied with their international unions, West Coast paper mill workers rebelled in 1964 and created AWPPW. Their slogan, “Guard Well the Democratic Rights of Your Members,” and newsletter, The Rebel, illustrate the union’s commitment to internal democracy.

In a struggle for members and jurisdictional control, some unions attacked others as “reds.” In April 1947, AFL National Aluminum Council president E.R. Stahl criticized the CIO Steelworkers representing the Troutdale aluminum plant during a Vancouver council meeting, stating that workers wanted “a loyal American organization free from any ‘isms’ [and] refuse to traffic with communists.”

To refute any taint of communism, the CIO expelled twelve unions between 1949 and 1950 that refused to purge left-leaning officers and members. The expelled unions included some of the federation’s most successful and militant—including the powerful International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers (Mine-Mill), and the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE), the third largest union in the CIO. Despite the CIO expulsions, the rank-and-file support for western-based unions such as the ILWU and Mine-Mill revealed the historically fierce independence of regional unions.

When the AFL-CIO merged in 1955 to unite labor and stem Cold War-era assaults, the new labor federation bore a closer resemblance to the cautious AFL than the militant CIO of the Depression years.

The ILWU has a long history of independence and militancy. Washington State Senator Annette Cleveland recalled her father Jim Forbes’ commitments as a longshorer at the Port of Cleveland in the late 1960s. “He enjoyed being outside, he enjoyed working hard, and he was a man of conviction and really saw his coworkers and fellow laborers as his extended family,” Cleveland came to recognize the importance of the ILWU when she accompanied him to pickets during the 1972 West Coast strike. “I distinctly remember how committed my father was to take a stand and ensuring that everyone was solid in their support... I absolutely understood as a young girl that the strike was about ensuring that wages continued to be fair... And in fact, my father made it clear to my sister and I that workers were treated equally... And that you know, one of the fundamental values we were raised with was the ILWU credo, and that credo is ‘An Injury to One is an Injury to All.’ And I know that that has absolutely influenced me.”
Community Connections

Unions have long countered negative publicity with local education and community support activities, such as contributing to school scholarships and local charities, serving on local boards, and sponsoring events. Through the Southwest Washington Labor Roundtable, area unions have promoted community activities, and individual unions have provided support and labor to institutions such as Share House and the Clark County Historical Museum.

Unions also championed Clark College and Mid-Columbia Manor. The Clark County Central Labor Council, Machinists Union, and Building Trades Council were active in organizing postwar vocational training programs for veterans, approaching Governor Mon C. Wallgren in 1946 to secure 75 percent of the cost of building such a program at Clark College. In 1963, labor leaders pushed for a $2 million federal loan for Vancouver’s tallest building, 15-story Mid-Columbia Manor (or Smith Tower) apartments for the elderly. That project’s goal was to “provide good housing for retired working people.” Today, the unusual building does just that, and continues to dominate the city’s skyline.

The good will unions tried to generate often went unnoticed. Former International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) officer Ed Barnes focused on supporting a Union Labor Press: “We’ve got to keep that Labor Press, and we’ve got to make sure that these unions do not cancel their subscriptions…once we lose that Labor Press, the only thing you’ve got to rely on then is the Oregonian, or the Columbian…or some of them that are non-union.”

The labor community also supported workers and their families, helping “Brothers and Sisters” on strike. Al Swindell recalled when his Association of Western Pulp and Paper Workers (AWPPW) union went on strike at Boise Cascade, “The Longshoremen really tried to support us during that long strike. They employed quite a few of our workers as they could as temporary workers on the docks. So we worked with other unions…I joined a Machinists Union while we were on strike and I worked at Columbia River Machine.” Swindell noted that workers and their families recognized they were contributing to a better future: “The cost is so high. The only people who win are the people who come after you in the labor movement [who] get those benefits and the pensions and the health care and the wages that you negotiated. If you didn’t actually work anytime during that nine month [strike] period, you lost a huge amount of money…you’re never going to make that up…Really the strike isn’t even about you, it’s about the people coming after. You’re looking at the future.” Nonetheless, families had great difficulties during long strikes with meager strike funds to pay mortgages and buy groceries.
Fresh Faces

For over a century, labor organizations were the bastions of white men, although some unions and World War II (temporarily) challenged gender and racial restrictions. The civil rights and women's movements pressured employers, unions, and governments to open their doors to those historically excluded from membership and jobs. Although Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act prohibited employment discrimination based on race, religion, sex, and national origin, there was resistance to such a diverse workforce.

After World War II, female workers in Camas found their mill jobs reclassified as "women’s" positions at lower pay. The Association of Western Pulp and Paper Workers (AWPPW) union eventually pressed for equal pay for women performing the same jobs as men, and an historic 1968 agreement between the union and West Coast pulp and paper mills raised their pay by 7 percent. AWPPW women formed a group called Women Inc. to address other Title VII issues in their industry.

"At that time [there was] equal work for equal pay, just a few years after we got hired. So...you had to work like the men because you were working for equal pay. The challenge for us was, not only being African American, and female, but it was trying to deal with the different personalities at that time. 1976 was pretty rough and you are looking at a predominately white male populace at the Camas mill. So it was a little rough there." Crystal Odum.

By the 1970s, many unions recognized the value of equal rights and inclusive memberships. Women and minorities saw that unions could improve wages and working conditions and enforce equal treatment. Today they comprise a majority of American union members, although not proportionately represented in labor leadership. In addition to more diversity, the composition of unions has shifted toward the public sector. These workers have a union membership rate (35.9 percent) over five times higher than private-sector workers (6.6 percent).

In 1965, Washington State passed the Professional Negotiations Act, requiring school boards to negotiate with employee groups. Aberdeen teachers led the state’s first teachers’ strike in 1972. The next year, Evergreen School District teachers voted to strike, closing schools for two weeks. At issue were a reduction-in-force proposal, class size, planning time, specialists, salary, and benefits. Evergreen was a rapidly growing district serving east Vancouver with over 300 teachers among the lowest paid in the state. Superior Court Judge Guthrie J. Langsdon ordered teachers to return to class. When they refused, he jailed Evergreen Education Association (EEA) President Fred Ensmen and Action Committee chair Dick Johnson. When EEA interim President John Zavodsky refused to order teachers back to work, the judge jailed him, too. The EEA then appointed a veteran female member as president, and teachers marched to the courtroom to surrender. The judge declined to lock up the mostly female teachers, but the leaders remained jailed for six weeks. The school board agreed to bargain for the first time, settling on May 25, 1973. The Washington Education Association called it the “most successful teacher strike in Washington history.”
The Price of Progress

Ever since 1897, when the first donkey engine for logging was introduced in Clark County, technological advances have streamlined production. Each generation has experienced technological change in the workplace. As the U.S. faced greater competition from Europe and Japan in the 1960s, companies modernized and sought ways to cut costs. By 1958, the Camas mill was Crown Zellerbach’s largest, producing over 400 kinds of paper products. Yet due to automation, the number of employees barely increased from the 1930s. In 1962, Vancouver Alcoa workers walked off the job to call attention to the need for increased job security in the face of growing plant automation. Al Swindell recalled that when he began working for Vancouver’s Boise Cascade in the 1960s, 750 people worked in the mill; at the time of its closure in 1996, only 300 workers remained. Issues of job security became a main cause of worker protests from the 1960s-2000s.

As the number of public sector workers expanded in the 1970s, well-paying union jobs in the industrial private sector began to vanish. Technology, increased productivity, and outsourcing all played roles in reducing jobs. This trend accelerated in the 1980s as companies began to close, move or consolidate operations.

Technology reshaped work in many ways. It also reshaped the face of the local economy as new firms located in Clark County. Tektronix established a plant in 1978 and employed 2,000 people by the mid-1980s. Other high-tech businesses followed, including Hewlett Packard, SEH America, and Kyocera. These new industries were primarily non-union.

Local and national headlines from the 1980s announced layoffs and shutdowns. Clark County’s manufacturing jobs declined from 13,070 in 1979 to 12,620 in 1982, mostly due to the faltering timber industry and mill closures. In 1974 Lyman Harris, Alcoa’s power manager in Vancouver, announced that his industry would rather build plants overseas than deal with the rising cost of electricity. The plant already had smelters in Suriname, Columbia, El Salvador, and Tunisia. By the 1980s, Vancouver Alcoa workers accepted pay cuts and fewer hours to avoid layoffs. Nonetheless, Alcoa closed the plant on June 3, 1986, two days after workers called a national strike.

In August 1985 The Columbian announced that Lucky Brewery would shut down, laying off 200 workers represented by Teamsters Local 58 in Longview. The brewery had produced beer in Vancouver for 128 years, making it the oldest beer-making operation west of the Rockies, and its neon Lucky Beer sign had long lit the city’s night sky. That same year, Crown Zellerbach in Camas consolidated its operations, employing 1,000 fewer workers, and sold its mill to James River Corporation of Richmond, Virginia. These closures capped off a period of massive attrition of labor in Clark County that still impacts the community.

In 1961, recognizing that shipping and waterfront industries had to mechanize to compete globally, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) negotiated the Mechanization and Modernization (M&M) Agreement, which allowed the maritime industry to introduce labor-saving equipment in exchange for benefits and security for workers. Despite accepting the M&M Agreement, the ILWU witnessed job losses over the next decade, leaving many to wonder if they had made the right decision. As tensions mounted over negotiations for a new contract, 96 percent of the members voted to strike, and on July 1, 1971, the ILWU initiated its first strike in 23 years. The strike shut down every port on the West Coast for 130 days in a monumental fight for job security in uncertain times.
Labor's Landscape

Since the 1980s, real wages for American workers have dropped, and organized labor has continued to lose members and power. Historians and economists studying this decline point to a variety of factors, including the unique system of American capitalism, the intensity of corporate opposition to labor organization, and court decisions and legislation that limit unions’ ability to organize workers or use pickets, boycotts and strikes.

The American labor movement has also failed to address economic, political, social and cultural changes. The legacy of racism, sexism, and hostility towards immigrants has continued to divide workers. Labor has also lost the loyalty of potential members who don’t understand the history and function of unions.

In the 1960s and 1970s, labor failed to organize and reach out to new workers. Even though the number of union members grew during this time, their percentage of the overall workforce fell from 30.3 percent in 1962 to 28.5 percent in 1973. The labor movement was unsuccessful in winning any policy reforms, even with Democrats controlling Congress and statehouses.

Structural changes in the economy also affected workers’ well-being. A series of recessions have kept unemployment high. The failure to successfully organize workers in the South led industries to relocate to these non-union, low-tax “havens,” and the threat of plant closures motivated workers to grant concessions. Capital’s ability to move across the globe in search of cheaper labor markets gave it a significant advantage over less-mobile working people rooted in their communities. Global trade agreements have resisted labor standards.

Clark County’s economy has largely changed to high tech and service-sector jobs, with many residents commuting to Portland for work. In 2009, the four largest employers in the area were Vancouver and Evergreen School Districts, PeaceHealth Southwest Medical Center, and Clark County government.

As the country has moved from a manufacturing to a service economy, the face of unions has changed dramatically as they attempt to organize cashiers, retail, and fast food workers, most of whom are female, minority, young, or poorly paid. They face formidable anti-union opponents, such as Walmart, the largest corporation in the world. But as Lowell Turner, professor at the Industrial Labor Relations School at Cornell noted: “Now this is the majority of jobs. If [unions are] not elevating these jobs, we’ll have a whole class of workers living in poverty.”

There have been some successes. Sandra Andrews recalled how in the late 1990s the “lunch ladies,” or Evergreen School District WyEast cafeteria workers, tried to join a union. The effort failed, but by 2001, “it really got going, and then [the vote to affiliate with the Teamsters] went through.”

Because of shrinking memberships, many local unions consolidated. Some shut their doors, others were absorbed by larger locals in Olympia or Portland. Dave Ritchie, business manager of Laborers International Local 335 in Vancouver, noted in 2013 that he used to serve 160 members, but “we’re down to 50-60 members because of the economy.”

In May 2012, Vancouver Hilton workers reached a collective bargaining agreement with management to increase wages and improve access to medical care. The 116 low-wage workers affiliated with UNITE HERE soon after the hotel opened in 2006. In its long struggle to win an agreement, the union enlisted the aid of community members, clergy, and other unions to help the workers and apply pressure on both city government and the hotel.
Contributions, Thanks to Unions

The fruits of organized labor benefit us all. Here are a few of the causes championed by unions—how many do you enjoy?

✓ Weekends
✓ Breaks
✓ 8-Hour Day/40-Hour Week
✓ Minimum Wage
✓ Overtime Pay
✓ Paid Vacation
✓ Employer-Sponsored Health Benefits
✓ Paid Sick Leave
✓ Family and Medical Leave
✓ Safety Standards
✓ Child Labor Laws
✓ Anti-Discrimination Laws
✓ Workers' Compensation
✓ Unemployment Insurance
✓ Retirement Security
...and many more!
Hard-working people created the economic, cultural, and social wealth of our nation. Yet the story of labor is sometimes missing from schoolbooks, television, and newspapers. At the end of the last century, most Americans were familiar with the role of labor unions in daily life—they had friends or family who belonged to a union, or they did themselves. So even if they didn’t always agree with labor unions, they understood their function in the workplace and society. Entire communities, including Clark County, supported union workers because they depended on their wages to support local businesses, taxes, and middle-class aspirations. Labor: A Working History introduces you to “the folks who gave you the weekend.”

The labor history of places like Seattle, Spokane or San Francisco may be better-known, but the history of smaller communities like Clark County can illuminate the ways workers formed and interacted with unions and employers. They were often more vulnerable—dependent on a few major industries, neighboring large cities, or powerful interest groups—and their struggles tell us much about how Americans won and sustained better wages and working conditions over the past hundred years.

Geography, politics, and people are important to this story. The area’s natural features—the Columbia River, rich soils, and lush forests—shaped the businesses that drew workers to the area. Local, state, and national events, movements, and policies also influenced the Clark County labor movement. And individuals—some of whose voices animate this gallery—often took courageous and unpopular positions to advance the goals and dreams of working people.

These workers rarely left behind accounts of their activities. Even unions have sometimes failed to preserve their records. Labor: A Working History tells an unfinished and incomplete story. We all play a role in this story, and share the responsibility for its preservation. So clock in...we have a lot of work to do.
A Labor of Love

Clark County Historical Museum extends our heartfelt appreciation to all those who helped Labor: A Working History come to life. The exhibit was curated by Dr. Laurie Mercier, labor historian and professor at Washington State University, Vancouver. We would like to offer a special thanks to Roben White and Kenneth Fry, who acted as our local labor community liaisons and worked tirelessly to make this exhibit possible.

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