

## Unions: A Little Background On A Little Category

“Unions!” Now, there’s a topic that most people seem to have strong opinions on—either vehemently for or against—and certainly it’s a topic charged with emotions, which shouldn’t be surprising in light of the fact that unions are wrapped up with people’s livelihoods. I’ve always been surprised, though, that the number of covers from unions (compared to the number of unions) is so small....but, first some historical background.

Although there were associations of craftsmen under the guild system of the late Middle Ages, unions had their real beginnings with the Industrial Revolution and go hand-in-hand with industrialization in all parts of the world. There were associations of journeymen in colonial America, but the Federal Society of Journeymen Cordwainers (Philadelphia, 1794) is usually considered the first trade union in the country.

The early 1830s, a period of industrial prosperity and inflation, was a time of union development; however, the financial Panic of 1837 halted this growth. After the Civil War, in 1866, the first national labor organization, The National Labor Union, was formed, but it collapsed with its entry into politics in 1872.

Of the early national organizations in this country, the Knights of Labor (1869-1917) was the most important, but it dwindled in numbers and significance with the rise of the American Federation of Labor in the 1890s under Samuel Gompers. The leaders of the AFL were always craft unionists and opposed the entry of the federation into politics. In 1905, a huge, unwieldy but militant industrial body arose, the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.), organizing all kinds of unskilled workers.

With the harrying of leftwing bodies during and after WW I, the I.W.W.’s membership shrank and the organization became ineffective in the 1920s. During the Depression, unions rapidly grew. It was here that the Congress of Industrial Organizations formed, made up initially of dissident unions of the AFL and led by John L. Lewis, president of the United Mine Workers of America.

The New Deal was favorable to the rapid growth of unions (i.e., National Labor Relations Act of 1935, etc.). Although there was often severe conflict between the AFL and CIO through the late 1930s-early 1950s, the two merged in 1955, representing more than 85% of organized labor in the US. Since that high point, unions in the US have since declined, suffering a number of problems including graft, violence, associations with organized crime, demands perceived by many as unreasonable, etc.

Amidst this turbulent and tension-filled atmosphere, there were covers issued by various unions, albeit relatively few. The late Art Houser, SC, put together the largest collection I know of, 750 as of 1997.

