

Organized labor unions have always played a role in both work and politics since they were developed. The purpose of unions has always been to defend workers' rights and to increase them. During the gilded age and industrial revolution when many of the first major labor unions formed, workers had minimal rights and had to spend years striking, trying to get laws to improve working conditions. Today, the purpose and role of labor unions should be the same: to protect the rights of the workers and to improve working conditions.

In the past, labor unions have been able to improve working conditions through their role in politics. In 1911, poor and hazardous working conditions led to the death of over a hundred women in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire. Afterward, the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union became involved in reforming the workplace to be safer and also promoting laws to guarantee safer workplaces and laws regarding workers' compensation.

During the Great Depression, union leaders lobbied for the National Labor Relations Act, which passed and was renamed the Wagner Act. It established and protected industrial workers right to form and participate in organized labor unions. The Wagner Act led to a dramatic rise in union membership as well as helping to establish new labor unions. Because of these unions and the Wagner act, workers were able to strike and fight for their rights. Many of the rights they fought for became legally protected such as minimum wage, safe working conditions, and more. All of this occurred because union leaders lobbied for the rights they desired and later unions fought for their rights. Today, labor unions can continue to play a role by lobbying for bills that will benefit the workers.

When unions are involved, other people become more involved in politics as well. According to a graph from the American Worker Project, states with higher levels of unionization also have considerably higher voter turnout. Unions clearly play a role in the voter

turnout; therefore they do have an impact on the voters. Unions can and should use their influence on the voters to promote laws that will benefit the workers. On the flip side of that graph, the states with a lower level of unionization also have a lower voter turnout. This is not the only negative thing about states where unions are less prevalent though. In Right-to-Work (RTW) states, the minimum wage is lower than it is in non-RTW states. A statistic in a study by the Economic Policy Institute shows that the average hourly wages in RTW states are 15.8% lower than those of non-RTW states. Right-to-Work states have much lower levels of unionization than non-RTW states, which correlate with the wage gap. Unions have obviously played a role in increasing minimum wage laws and improving wages in general. Unions can continue to improve and increase wages through their role in politics.

While problems such as child labor, meager wages, and seventy-hour workweeks are no longer a problem like they were in the early twentieth century, many problems exist in the workforce today. Many companies and employers are trying to shirk responsibility for pensions, health insurance, and some workplace safety protections. Employers are also downsizing and moving jobs offshore, thus making employees jobs and incomes insecure. Using their political influence, labor unions can protect employees from becoming victims of downsizing and the like and ensure that employers uphold safety codes, provide health insurance, and cover pensions.

Labor unions should continue to fulfill their purpose by continuing to introduce, lobby for, and promote new laws that will improve wages, working conditions, job security, and other items that will benefit the workers. Unions should also continue to use their political power to defend laws that are advantageous and favorable for the workers they are protecting. Clearly labor unions should be very involved in politics by working to establish more rewarding laws to enhance working conditions.