A Brief History of Labor Unions in the United States
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Directions: Read the following carefully. After reading the passage, look over the questions that are attached. These questions will be used for classroom discussion.

The labor movement has played a significant role in the history of our country. Many people came to the United States as laborers, either in the form of indentured servants or slaves. The unionization of laborers also takes its roots from the early beginnings in America. Although unions during the Revolutionary period were mostly temporary, their movements set the stage for the “modern” unionization of workers. The unionization would lead to many of the benefits that workers enjoy today.

Many of the first unions were formed to gain workers higher wages and shorter workdays. These unions often disbanded after their goals were achieved. An example of this came in 1778 when a group of printers in New York City united to gain an increase in wages. They did and then disbanded (Illinois Labor History Society). This was not an uncommon practice. However, many of the unions were not as successful. The Illinois Labor History Society reports that the Typographical Society of New York was on strike for ten years and, like many of the unions of the era, were not successful.

As the nation was growing, so was the need for labor. Many inventions and innovations turned the country from an agricultural society to an industrial society. This move was known as the Industrial Revolution. With this revolution came the need for more labor. With more laborers in the workforce came the need to protect laborers from being mistreated by their employers. The leaders of these union movements pushed for ten-hour workdays. They were granted legislation in 1837. However, many employers
found a loophole in the law that would force their employees to work longer hours (Illinois Labor History Society). Workers began to recognize the power their employers possessed. This persuaded small city unions to try and unite with other cities and form larger unions. The first of these was the National Labor Union formed in 1866. This organization helped persuade congress to set a Federal eight-hour workday, which applied to government employees (Illinois Labor History Society). New groups continued to form during this era including the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor (AFL).

As the Industrial Revolution came into high gear the need for laborers again increased. This period was also marked by mass immigration numbers, which increased the number of laborers in the labor pool. This also caused the value of the individual worker to decrease. This was because someone, especially in the unskilled jobs, could easily replace a worker if need be. The devaluing of the laborer led to lower wages and poor working conditions. The unionization movement once again gained in popularity. Different union movements came about and the strike was used as an attempt to get their demands noticed. The Pullman Railroad Strike and the United Mine Workers strike in Pennsylvania were ended by government intervention (Miller). Other interesting happenings of this time period to research include the Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire and the Wobblies.
The unions, most notably the AFL, urged congress to pass legislation to help laborers. Congress did so when it created the U.S. Department of Labor, which was mandated to protect the rights of wage earners (Miller). The department went to work protecting child workers and demanding better working conditions. One of the crucial legislative acts to the union movement was the passing of the Clayton Act in 1914. The Clayton Act made it know that "the labor of a human being is not a commodity or article of commerce" and made unionization not applicable to the Sherman Act (Miller). The Clayton Act, in more general terms, legalized strikes and boycotts. This was a huge step towards the cause of the labor unions.

However, the Great Depression was not far behind. With this depression came increased unemployment and lower wages. Many acts were passed that would protect the rights of the worker. Two of the most significant was the Public Contracts Act and the Fair Labor Standards Act, which set labor standards including minimum wage, overtime pay, and child labor provisions (Illinois Labor History Society). Along with the depression came Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal. Many new programs were introduced including the Social Security Act, which is still in place today.

World War II put a bit of a stall in labor union activities due to the war effort. Many of the unions pledged a no-strike policy during the war. After the war, many unions would get back to the swing of gaining fair labor laws. Child labor was prohibited in 1949 and the Equal Pay Act and Civil Rights Acts were passed in the 1960s to help
eliminate discrimination in the workplace (Illinois Labor History Society). Some of these things may not have come about had it not been for union activity and the uniting of America’s workers.

**Resources**

http://www.kentlaw.edu/ilhs/curricul.htm#contents.

Questions

1. How have unions changed our lives today?

2. Economically, what changes have come about to help the employee? Do you think these changes hurt the employer?

3. Should unions have the ability to strike in order to have their demands met?

4. From what you know and what you’ve read, what is your opinion of labor unions?