

A Major Reason John L. Lewis And His Followers Broke With The Afl And Formed The Cio Was That:

A Major Reason John L. Lewis And His Followers Broke With The AFL And Formed The CIO Was That: their differing visions for organized labor, particularly regarding union democracy, industrial unionism, and the approach to bargaining power. This historic split in the American labor movement during the 1930s marked a significant turning point, shaping the future of labor rights and union strategies in the United States.

Background: The American Federation of Labor and Its Limitations

The AFL's Focus on Craft Unionism

The American Federation of Labor (AFL), founded in 1886, was primarily a federation of craft unions representing skilled workers. Its philosophy centered on organizing workers based on their specific trades or crafts, emphasizing better wages, hours, and working conditions within those trades. While effective in certain sectors, this approach often excluded unskilled or semi-skilled workers, limiting the scope of union influence.

The AFL's Strategy and Challenges During the 1920s

Throughout the early 20th century, the AFL maintained a conservative stance, prioritizing skilled labor and often resisting broader industrial organizing efforts. This approach faced challenges during the Great Depression, as economic hardship intensified workers' desire for more comprehensive protections and collective bargaining power. Many workers felt that the AFL's craft-based strategy was too narrow to address the needs of a rapidly changing industrial economy.

The Rise of Industrial Unions and the Need for a New Approach

Industrial Workers' Dissatisfaction

During the 1930s, there was a growing movement among unskilled and semi-skilled industrial workers to form unions that could represent all workers within an industry, regardless of specific skills. This approach, known as industrial unionism, aimed to consolidate workers across trades into a single union, increasing bargaining power and

political influence.

Key Factors Driving the Split

Several factors contributed to the rift between John L. Lewis and the AFL:

- **Desire for Inclusive Organizing:** Lewis and his followers believed in organizing all workers within an industry, not just skilled trades, to build stronger, more effective unions.
- **Discontent with AFL's Tactics:** The AFL's reluctance to embrace industrial unionism and its conservative stance on strikes and bargaining frustrated many workers and organizers.
- **Leadership Disagreements:** Lewis's leadership style and vision for a more militant, inclusive labor movement clashed with AFL leadership's cautious approach.
- **Response to the Great Depression:** The economic crisis underscored the need for a more aggressive and unified labor movement capable of challenging big business and advocating for broader social reforms.

The Formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO)

Founding and Objectives

In 1935, John L. Lewis led a breakaway faction from the AFL to establish the Committee for Industrial Organization, which later became the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). The CIO aimed to organize workers on an industrial basis, regardless of skill level, and to pursue a more militant and inclusive approach to unionism.

Strategies and Tactics of the CIO

The CIO adopted several key strategies:

- **Industrial Unionism:** Organizing entire industries rather than individual crafts.
- **Mass Mobilization:** Encouraging large-scale strikes and protests to increase leverage.
- **Inclusive Membership:** Welcoming unskilled, semi-skilled, and skilled workers alike.
- **Political Advocacy:** Pushing for labor-friendly legislation and policies.

Major Achievements of the CIO

The CIO's efforts led to significant victories:

- Organized millions of workers across industries like steel, auto, and mining.
- Facilitated landmark strikes, notably the Flint Sit-Down Strike of 1936-1937, which was pivotal in union recognition.
- Helped to shift public opinion toward supporting broader labor rights.

The Impact of the Split on the American Labor Movement

Short-Term Consequences

The division created two major labor entities:

1. The AFL, continuing to focus on craft unions and traditional strategies.
2. The CIO, promoting industrial unionism and more aggressive tactics.

This split intensified competition for members and influence, leading to both challenges and opportunities within the labor movement.

Long-Term Effects

Over time, the CIO's approach proved more effective in organizing large segments of the industrial workforce, leading to:

- Enhanced bargaining power for workers.
- Major legislative victories, including the Fair Labor Standards Act and National Labor Relations Act.
- The eventual reunification of the AFL and CIO in 1955, forming the AFL-CIO, which remains a dominant labor federation today.

Why the Break Was a Turning Point in Labor History

Advancement of Industrial Unionism

The split allowed for the development and adoption of industrial unionism as a core strategy, which proved crucial in organizing the modern American industrial workforce.

Influence on Labor Legislation

The militant and inclusive tactics championed by the CIO helped push for reforms that improved working conditions, wages, and workers' rights across the United States.

Legacy of Leadership and Strategy

John L. Lewis's decision to break from the AFL demonstrated the importance of adapting union strategies to changing economic realities and worker needs, inspiring future generations of labor leaders.

Conclusion

The primary reason John L. Lewis and his followers broke with the AFL and formed the CIO was their desire to create a more inclusive, militant, and effective union movement that could better organize the industrial workforce. This pivotal split not only reshaped the landscape of American labor unions but also contributed significantly to advances in workers' rights and social justice in the United States. The legacy of this division underscores the importance of strategic innovation and leadership in the ongoing struggle for fair labor practices and economic equity.

Frequently Asked Questions

What was the primary reason John L. Lewis and his followers broke away from the AFL to form the CIO?

The main reason was their desire to organize industrial workers on a broader scale, as the AFL focused mainly on craft unions, which limited the inclusion of all workers in key industries.

How did disagreements over industrial unionism lead to the formation of the CIO by John L. Lewis?

Disputes arose because Lewis and other leaders believed that organizing entire industries

rather than individual crafts was essential for better bargaining power, prompting them to establish the CIO as a separate entity from the AFL.

What role did the issue of racial inclusion play in John L. Lewis's decision to split from the AFL?

Lewis and his followers wanted to promote more inclusive union policies that embraced a diverse workforce, which they felt was insufficiently supported within the AFL, contributing to their decision to form the CIO.

How did the economic landscape of the 1930s influence John L. Lewis's decision to create the CIO?

The Great Depression highlighted the need for stronger, more effective labor organization of industrial workers, motivating Lewis to break away from the AFL and establish a union that could better represent those workers' interests.

What was the impact of John L. Lewis's formation of the CIO on the American labor movement?

The split led to increased unionization of industrial workers, expanded workers' rights, and fostered a more inclusive and militant labor movement, ultimately strengthening the voice of workers in the U.S.

Additional Resources

A Major Reason John L. Lewis And His Followers Broke With The AFL And Formed The CIO Was That the existing structure of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) was increasingly seen as inadequate for addressing the evolving needs of American workers, especially those in industrial sectors. This pivotal split in the American labor movement marked a significant turning point in U.S. labor history, driven by deep-seated disagreements over representation, strategy, and the scope of union activities. At the heart of this division was John L. Lewis, a formidable labor leader whose vision for broader, more inclusive unionism clashed with the more conservative, craft-oriented approach of the AFL. The formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) signified a new chapter aimed at empowering industrial workers and transforming the landscape of organized labor in America.

The Context: The State of Organized Labor Before the Split

Before delving into the reasons behind the schism, it is crucial to understand the

landscape of organized labor in the early 20th century. The AFL, founded in 1886, primarily championed skilled craft workers—those with specialized skills or trades such as carpenters, electricians, and printers. Its philosophy prioritized craft unionism, which often meant excluding unskilled or semi-skilled workers and focusing on negotiating better wages and working conditions for its members.

While this approach yielded success for many skilled trades, it left large segments of the industrial workforce unorganized and unrepresented. The rise of large-scale industrial enterprises—such as steel, automotive, and electrical manufacturing—created a workforce that was predominantly unskilled or semi-skilled, demanding a different kind of unionism capable of organizing across entire industries rather than specific crafts.

Key points about the pre-split labor movement:

- AFL's focus on skilled craft unions.
- Exclusion of unskilled and semi-skilled workers.
- Limited reach in industrial sectors like steel, automobiles, and textiles.
- A tendency towards conservative strategies and avoiding confrontation with major corporations.

This environment set the stage for discontent among industrial workers and leaders like John L. Lewis, who believed that the AFL's approach was insufficient for the needs of the rapidly changing economy.

John L. Lewis: A Leader of Industrial Unionism

John L. Lewis emerged as a prominent figure within the labor movement during the 1910s and 1920s. As a leader of the United Mine Workers (UMW), Lewis was known for his militant stance and ability to mobilize workers for significant strikes and negotiations. His leadership style was characterized by a willingness to challenge both employers and existing labor organizations when he believed workers' interests were not being adequately served.

Lewis's vision extended beyond traditional craft unionism. He advocated for industrial unionism, which aimed to organize all workers within an industry—skilled and unskilled alike—under a single union. This approach promised greater bargaining power and the ability to coordinate strikes and negotiations more effectively across entire industries.

Features of John L. Lewis's approach:

- Emphasis on organizing workers by industry rather than craft.
- Advocacy for more militant tactics and direct action.
- Focus on uniting all workers within a given industry.
- Desire for greater influence and bargaining power for workers.

His leadership in the UMW and other efforts demonstrated that industrial unionism could be a potent force, challenging the craft-based dominance of the AFL.

The Discontent with AFL and the Push for Industrial Unionism

Despite its successes, the AFL was increasingly viewed by some leaders, particularly Lewis, as out of touch with the realities faced by many American workers in industrial sectors. The AFL's craft-based structure often resulted in fragmented bargaining power, weaker collective action, and limited ability to address the concerns of unskilled workers.

Main reasons for discontent included:

- Limited scope: AFL unions often excluded unskilled workers, leaving large portions of the industrial workforce unorganized.
- Fragmented bargaining: Multiple small craft unions bargaining separately weakened workers' ability to negotiate industry-wide improvements.
- Resistance to change: AFL leadership was hesitant to adopt more militant or confrontational tactics that could threaten industrial stability.
- Inequality and representation issues: Many workers felt their needs were ignored, fostering frustration and a desire for more inclusive unionism.

Lewis and his followers believed that to truly empower workers, unions needed to organize entire industries regardless of skill level, thus increasing their bargaining power and political influence.

Pros of industrial unionism:

- Broader worker representation within industries.
- Greater bargaining power due to industry-wide organization.
- Increased solidarity among workers, leading to more effective strikes.
- Potential to challenge corporate power more effectively.

Cons of industrial unionism:

- Resistance from established craft unions and AFL leadership.
- Greater organizational complexity.
- Potential for internal conflicts within industrial unions.
- Possible opposition from employers wary of broader union influence.

The push for industrial unionism became a central issue, with Lewis and others advocating for a new approach that would better serve the needs of the working class amid the changing economic landscape.

The Formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO)

The culmination of these tensions was the formal creation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations in 1935. Originally part of the AFL, the CIO was established as a separate entity to promote industrial unionism and organize unskilled and semi-skilled workers across major industries.

Key features of the CIO's formation:

- Emphasis on inclusive, industry-wide organizing.
- A more aggressive and militant stance compared to the AFL.
- Open to all workers, regardless of skill level or craft.
- Focus on large-scale strikes and direct action.

John L. Lewis played a pivotal role in the CIO's development, leveraging his leadership in the United Mine Workers and his vision of a broader, more powerful labor movement. His leadership helped attract workers from industries like steel, automobiles, rubber, and electrical manufacturing, transforming the CIO into a formidable force.

Advantages of the CIO's approach:

- Rapid growth of union membership.
- Increased bargaining power for industrial workers.
- Ability to challenge corporate dominance more effectively.
- Enhanced political influence for labor causes.

Challenges faced by the CIO:

- Resistance from AFL unions and leadership.
- Internal conflicts and disputes over strategy.
- Legal challenges and government intervention.
- Balancing militant tactics with organizational stability.

The split from the AFL was not merely a matter of organizational disagreement but reflected deeper ideological differences concerning the future of organized labor in America.

The Impact and Legacy of the Split

The formation of the CIO marked a significant turning point in the American labor movement. It shifted the focus from craft-specific unions to broader industrial unions, fundamentally changing how labor organized and negotiated.

Positive outcomes:

- Significant increases in union membership, especially among unskilled and industrial workers.
- Greater political influence of labor in national policy debates.
- Successful strikes and negotiations that improved wages and working conditions.
- Inspiration for similar movements worldwide advocating industrial unionism.

Criticisms and setbacks:

- Internal divisions and conflicts within the CIO.
- Struggles with management and government opposition.
- Periodic decline in influence during the late 20th century.
- Ongoing debates about the effectiveness of industrial unionism versus craft unionism.

Legacy:

The split between the AFL and CIO ultimately led to the reunification of the two organizations in 1955, under the AFL-CIO umbrella. However, the lessons learned from this division—particularly the importance of inclusive, industry-wide organization—continue to influence contemporary labor strategies.

Conclusion: The Major Reason for the Split

In sum, the primary reason John L. Lewis and his followers broke with the AFL and formed the CIO was their conviction that the AFL's craft-based approach was insufficient for organizing and representing the rapidly expanding industrial workforce. Lewis believed that only through industrial unionism—organizing all workers within an industry regardless of skill—could workers achieve true power and influence. The AFL's resistance to this vision, coupled with its conservative strategies and exclusionary practices, prompted Lewis to forge a new path, leading to the creation of the CIO.

This pivotal decision reshaped the American labor movement, fostering a more inclusive, militant, and industry-focused approach to unionism. While the split posed immediate challenges, it ultimately contributed to a more dynamic and influential labor movement, capable of advocating for a broader spectrum of workers and shaping policies that benefit the working class nationwide.

The story of John L. Lewis and the formation of the CIO exemplifies how ideological differences, strategic visions, and leadership within organized labor can lead to profound structural changes—changes that have echoes in the ongoing struggles for workers' rights today.

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