

American Federation of Labor Founded - (1886)

American Federation of Labor (AFL)

The American Federation of Labor (AFL) was formed in 1886. Samuel Gompers (1850-1924), who served as president 1886-1895 and 1896-1924, provided conservative leadership. Instead of trying to reshape the fundamental institutions of American life, as some of the more radical union activists were trying to do, the AFL focused on securing for its members higher wages, better working conditions, and a shorter work week.

Because the union did not attempt to organize unskilled workers, it made few gains among new workers during the 1920s, when much of the growth of the economy took place in mass-production industries such as automobiles, rubber, chemicals, and utilities. In fact, although Gompers' middle-of-the-road leadership helped make the AFL the largest and most powerful union in the country, compared to earlier decades, that was not very powerful, and membership dropped dramatically.

Gompers' commitment to organizing skilled workers, avoiding the radical left, and accomplishing change through established channels whenever possible, rather than through strikes, led conservative businessmen to view him favorably. Nevertheless, he opposed the open shop movement of the 1920s and the spread of company unions (unions organized by companies to keep away outside organizers).

William Green succeeded Gompers as president of the AFL in 1924. The Coolidge Papers case files American Federation of Labor 1923-29 and High Cost of Living 1923-24 contain references to the AFL and show that, despite differences, President Coolidge took care to cultivate good personal relations with its leaders.