Labor’s Top 10 Accomplishments

Washington, D.C. To mark the final Labor Day of the century, Union have unveiled a list of the 10 greatest labor accomplishments of the last 100 years. The list, ranked in order of significance by scholars from Harvard, Yale and Cornell universities, MIT, and the Economic Policy Institute, was presented by AFSCME Pres. Gerald W. McEntee at a press conference.

1. Founding of the Committee for Industrial Organization, later the Congress of Industrial Organizations or CIO (1938)
   After the American Federation of Labor voted against organizing workers “across trades” in a factory, preferring to group workers by individual craft or trade, the CIO and its visionary leader, John L. Lewis, recognized the potential power of mobilizing workers across occupational lines in a given industry. The approach opened the union door to what would become labor’s core constituency — mass production workers.

2. Passage of the Social Security Act (1935)
   This New Deal legislation provided workers with unemployment insurance, aid to dependent children and rehabilitation for the physically disabled. It also improved public health and provided pensions to workers in their old age. Today, Unions are leading the fight to strengthen and preserve Social Security — a benefit to some 44 million people.

   Also known as the “Wagner Act,” this law served as the foundation for current U.S. labor law, granting unions the right to organize and obligating employers to bargain collectively on hours, wages and other terms and conditions of employment. Unions have used the NLRA to secure collective bargaining rights for workers across the country.

4. GM Sit-Down Strikes (1936-37)
   Anti-union sentiments in the fledgling auto industry in the 1930s triggered a sit-down job action by 50 workers at a Fisher Body plant in Flint, Mich., an action that inspired similar strikes by 485,000 auto workers across the U.S. and Canada in an 8-month period. The Flint strike lasted 45 days, with strikers winning a five-cent-an-hour raise and an agreement by management to rehire the strikers and recognize the union.

5. Civil Rights Act/Title VII (1964)
   This landmark legislation prohibited discrimination by employers or unions on the basis of race, national origin, color, religion or gender. Union’s unprecedented growth in the 60s and 70s was due in large measure to the union’s reputation for fighting for fair treatment for all workers, but particularly minorities.

   In 1962, President Kennedy signed Executive Order 10988, which recognized the rights of federal employees to join unions. This order spearheaded the rapid expansion of all public sector organizing. A key event of this period was the death of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., killed while in Memphis on behalf of striking AFSCME sanitation workers.

7. Fair Labor Standards Act (1938)
   The FLSA granted sweeping protections to workers — establishing a minimum wage (25 cents an hour) and the 8-hour work day, providing for overtime, and prohibiting the use of child labor in all businesses engaged in interstate commerce. Despite breaking important ground, the FLSA excluded large numbers of workers, not the least of whom were public service workers.

8. “Bread and Roses” Strike (1912)
   This sometimes violent strike at a Lawrence, Mass., textile mill was named for the song sung by strikers determined to win more than a subsistence life. The strike became synonymous with the struggle of workers to better their working conditions.

9. World War II Support
   The trade union movement that was beginning to flex its collective muscles at the end of the 30s put those same muscles to work on behalf of the war effort. And, like the patriots they were, American unions pledged not to strike and received no-layoff concessions for the duration of the war.

10. Occupational Safety & Health Act (1970)
    Providing a safe workplace had been a primary goal of the labor movement since its inception. Many years later, President Nixon — a conservative Republican — was convinced to sign the first comprehensive federal legislation covering safety in the workplace. Unions work daily to enforce OSHA’s regulations, and also to expand and refine safe protections for all workers.