

shall have the right to organize and bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing,” which marked the first time the federal government legally recognized workers’ right to union representation. Although NIRA, and its Section 7a, were quickly found unconstitutional, the support of the federal government for labor organizing helped strengthen an already growing surge in rank-and-file labor organizing.

In the wake of the passage of Section 7a, millions of American workers acted on their desire for union representation—more than 1,800 strikes occurred in 1934 alone—while also demonstrating that the AFL would not be able to contain or take full advantage of the aspirations of American industrial workers. Mass strikes broke out in 1934 among West Coast dock workers, in auto parts factories in Toledo, Ohio, in the trucking industry in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and in the East Coast textile industry. In each case, the AFL had made initial efforts to act on the rights specified in Section 7a and to organize thousands of new workers. The AFL, however, either backed down completely or failed to address the grievances of rank-and-file workers. Tens of thousands of workers then acted without the support of the AFL. Workers battled with police, the National Guard, and citizens’ committees in efforts to win their unions. In those battles, the West Coast International Longshoremen’s Association, which would become the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, built its longstanding reputation for radicalism and interracial social movement unionism. In Toledo, workers at the Electro Auto Lite Company survived clashes with National Guardsmen to win union recognition, wage increases, and other gains, while creating an important piece of the foundation for what became the United Auto Workers. In Minneapolis, four workers died in citywide violence, but they also broke through in that previously hardcore anti-union city and set the stage for the national unionization of the trucking industry.

In the long term, the 1934 strikes helped organize broad sectors of the American working class, but in the short term the strikes also helped polarize domestic politics. Indeed, 1935 and 1936 were years of greatly increasing political conflict. President Roosevelt found his support from business leaders evaporating after NIRA was struck down and after the 1934 strikes demonstrated the threat, as owners saw it, of giving workers the right to unionize. At the same time, critics to the president’s left argued that he had done too little to provide direct relief to the unemployed in the form of jobs, cash relief, and a safety net of welfare programs. Radical communists and socialists joined militant organizers for the unemployed to push for greater support for the unemployed. Populists such as Louisiana senator Huey Long and the Catholic radio priest Father Charles Coughlin, among others, demanded that the president do more for “the forgotten man.”

In response, President Roosevelt broke with the business leaders and pushed in 1935 for a flurry of legislation that would come to be known as the “Second New Deal.” The Social Security Act and Aid to Families with Dependent Children both responded directly to the populist critics by providing old age insurance and relief to poor families. In the long run, both allowed for a major reduction in poverty among young people and the elderly. In addition, the Second New Deal greatly expanded public works programs. Congress also passed the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), which reaffirmed workers’ rights to organize unions and bargain collectively, outlawed what the act called “unfair labor practices” that amounted to business efforts to prevent unionization or to break unions, and created the National Labor Relations Board to adjudicate workers’ complaints against their employers.

The Second New Deal had only limited immediate effects. The first Social Security check did not go out until January 31, 1940. The public works agencies were administered by local offices and were, therefore, racially segregated in the