

National Labor Union (NLU)

National Labor Union (NLU) was a political-action movement that from 1866 to 1873 sought to improve working conditions through legislative reform rather than through collective bargaining.

The NLU began in 1866 with a convention in Baltimore, Md., called to organize skilled and unskilled laborers, farmers, and reformers into a coalition that would pressure Congress to pass a law limiting the workday to eight hours. Seventy-seven delegates attended the convention, and during its brief existence the National Labor Union may have had as many as 500,000 members.

Acting on the belief that owners and workers shared identical interests, the NLU was opposed to strikes. It relied increasingly on political action to meet its goals and in 1872 transformed itself into the National Labor Reform Party. As such it nominated David Davis of Illinois, associate justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, as its presidential candidate. Davis withdrew his candidacy, however, and the party made a poor showing at the polls. After holding one last convention in 1873, the National Labor Union collapsed and disappeared.

Divide and conquer. That simple strategy gave the owners the advantage over labor until the dawn of the 20th century. Laborers did not all have the same goals. By favoring one group over another, the bosses could create internal dissent in any union. Unions were spread from town to town. Unity among them might make a more effective boycott or strike, but bringing diverse groups together across a large area was extremely difficult.

Owners were smart enough to circulate **BLACKLISTS**. These lists contained the names of any workers active in the union. If anyone on the list would show up in another town trying to get hired (or to start another union), the employers would be wise. Still, the ratio of labor to management was so large that national organization was inevitable. The first group to clear the hurdles was the National Labor Union.

William Sylvis and the NLU



William Sylvis worked in many trades in his life, from wagon making to canal boat building. Later, he became a pioneer in organizing and motivating labor unions.

By 1866, there were about 200,000 workers in local unions across the United States. **WILLIAM SYLVIS** seized the opportunity presented by these numbers and established the first nationwide labor organization, named the **NATIONAL LABOR UNION**. Sylvis had very ambitious goals. Not only did the NLU fight for higher wages and shorter hours, Sylvis took labor activity into the political arena. The NLU supported legislation banning **PRISON LABOR**, land reform laws to keep public holdings out of the hands of speculators, and national currency reform to raise farm prices.

It brought together skilled and unskilled workers, as well as farmers. The National Labor Union stopped short of admitting African Americans. **RACIST** tendencies of the times prevailed, despite the wisdom of bringing as many workers as possible into the fold. Unfortunately for the NLU, it tried to represent too many different groups. Farmers had their own agenda, and skilled workers often had different realities than the unskilled. When the Panic of 1873 hit America, the union was severely disabled. Soon after, the National Labor Union withered away.