

Philadelphia Printers Strike (1786)

Henry Rosemont's article, "Benjamin Franklin and the Philadelphia Typographical Strikers of 1786" discusses the history behind the Philadelphia printer's strike of 1786 and the strikers' relationship with Benjamin Franklin. According to Rosemont, "these were the first American workers who deliberately voted to stand out for a specific wage and to provide mutual assistance in maintaining it."

It was not officially stated but it was widely accepted in the years prior to the strike that journeymen in Philadelphia's printing business worked for the price of six dollars a week. Following a sharp drop in the cost of living, employer's saw an opportunity to attempt to reduce wages using the new lower cost of living as justification. It is thought by some that the reduction of wages was only one sixth of a dollar a week. According to Rosemont the writers who argued this have "miscalculated the exchange of rates." In reality, the actual reduction was from a 45 shilling week back down to a 35 shilling week. In U.S. dollars, the employers wanted to reduce the weekly salaries of it's employees from \$6.00 a week to about \$4.33 a week. On May 31st, 1786 the printers gathered and decided to strike until their employers went back to paying them \$6 a week. The strike ended on June 10 with the printers earning back their \$6 a week wage. This is widely accepted as the first time that a group of workers held out for a specific age and worked to maintain that wage.

The strike was successful largely due to the fact that outside workers did not step in to replace the striking printers. Many of the strikers lived within working distance of their jobs and other strikers stayed at inns located near their job sites. This helped to deter "replacement workers" from taking their jobs. On top of this, the strikers made sure to let printers from nearby cities and towns know that well respected typographers such as Francis Wrigley, John Albright, and Theophilus Cossart were among the strikers. It is very possible that would-be "scabs" refused the newly opened jobs out of respect for these men.

As chief executive of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and as an "old stager of the printing trade", Benjamin Franklin had a vested interest in the well being of Philadelphia's printing industry. As a radical and a patriot, Franklin felt for the wage earners. He sided with, organized and guided these printers and even allowed them to hold their meetings in his home. Although the constitution of the striking printer's society was written down by Thomas Lang, (a leader in the founding of the printer's society) the ideas that the constitution contained were truly those of Benjamin Franklin. If it is true that Franklin was the true framer of this constitution, then it is also true that within the constitution, Franklin set up the first system to provide mutual assistance in maintaining a wage achieved through a strike. The society developed a system of dues and penalty fees much like those seen in today's unions to keep the society functioning.

In 1793, the society published it's constitution and proclaimed that they will be called the Franklin society after the late Dr. Benjamin Franklin for his patriotism and outstanding contribution to the Philadelphia Typographer's strike of 1786. The number of contributions that Benjamin Franklin made to the United States is astounding. We already owe our understanding of electricity, international relations and politics to Benjamin Franklin. Now, I think it is fairly

safe to say that we can also thank Franklin for helping to organize the first documented wage strike in American history.