

George Meany

First president of the AFL-CIO

As the first president of the newly formed AFL-CIO, George Meany brought the labor federation into the modern world.

Meany became president of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) in 1952 and immediately sought to merge it with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). When the two merged in 1955, Meany was elected the new alliance's president. He guided labor through many challenges and left his mark on the movement.

Meany came from Irish-Catholic roots in New York City. His father was president of the Bronx local of the United Association of Plumbers and Pipe Fitters. In 1910, at age 16, Meany followed in his father's footsteps, joining the union as an apprentice.

A decade later, the young plumber was elected to the union's executive board and soon became a full-time business agent. By 1934, he had risen to the rank of president of the New York State Federation of Labor.

Under Meany, the New York AFL convinced the state to pass one of the nation's first unemployment insurance laws and boosted President Franklin D. Roosevelt to reelection in 1936. By 1939, Meany ascended to the office of secretary-treasurer for the national AFL. He helped with the formation of the War Labor Board, which grew union membership during World War II by protecting union workers' rights and resolving disputes as millions of workers joined the war effort. At the war's end, Meany insisted on the inclusion of workers' rights in the Marshall Plan to ensure that European workers would have a fair share of the benefits of economic recovery, and pushed for the creation of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions to promote unions in

postwar Europe and throughout the world.

Faced with congressional hostility toward unions and the passage of the repressive Taft-Hartley Act in 1947, a law that rolled back some union rights, Meany responded by creating Labor's League for Political Education, the first full-scale effort by the AFL to educate and mobilize union members, including voter registration drives, and efforts that expanded labor's political influence. It later became the AFL-CIO's Committee on Political Education, serving as the political arm to raise voluntary funds and mobilize members for political education and campaign involvement.

Upon the death of AFL President William Green in 1952, Meany was elected president.

His first task was to unite labor. The AFL first brought unions under one umbrella when it was founded in 1886, but in 1935, several industrial unions led by United Mine Workers President John L. Lewis had split from the AFL to form the CIO. These unions separated because they wanted to organize all workers regardless of skill and were frustrated by the AFL's focus on skilled workers. Meany mended the disagreements and engineered a merger of the two groups in 1955. He agreed to accept the CIO's unions "as is," leaving the remaining conflicts between the two sides to be worked out after joining together as one organization. The modern AFL-CIO was born with 15 million members and Meany as its first president.



International Ladies' Garment Workers President David Dubinsky demonstrates garment cutting for AFL-CIO President George Meany and his wife on May 6, 1960.

Meany modernized and expanded the new organization. Under his leadership, the labor movement won unprecedented gains for working Americans, including improved worker safety laws, improvements to Social Security, anti-discrimination laws and expansion of federal and state workers' union presence. A strong supporter of civil and equal rights, Meany put the AFL-CIO's muscle behind the civil rights movement, insisting that the 1964 Civil Rights Act outlaw workplace as well as community discrimination in public accommodation, education, federally funded programs and voting rights.

Meany saw that members of Congress were being influenced by special interest lobbying, but Meany believed the labor movement was not just another special interest. Rather, it was the only organization in America that spoke for the common citizen—the "people's lobby" as he called it. That meant unions were more than advocacy groups; they were an essential part of American democracy. There could be no democracy without union rights and no union rights without democracy, he said.

Meany stepped down in 1979 and died the next year, but his legacy of leadership made a mark on the labor movement that is still felt today. **PR**