



VIRGINIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Story of Virginia

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Hard Day at Work?

***Organized Labor in Virginia* explores how struggle changed the workplace**

Richmond, VA—More than likely, most Virginia women have never said, “Thank you, Lucy Randolph Mason, for advocating for women’s rights in the 1920s.” Virginia children don’t stop and think, “I could be working in a factory right now if it weren’t for the National Child Labor Committee display at the 1907 Jamestown Exposition.” Many African American workers in Virginia might not realize that the jobs they currently hold could be a result of a strike at Richmond tobacco stemmeries in 1937. And the majority of working Virginians probably have no idea how the 1935 Wagner Act and 1947 Taft-Hartley Act affected the work they do today.

In a new exhibition titled *Organized Labor in Virginia*, opening Labor Day—Monday, September 6, 2010—the Virginia Historical Society (VHS) explores the evolution of organized labor in Virginia, from pre-union contracts and apprenticeship agreements in the early 19th century through the 1950s, when the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO) merged in order to become even more powerful and effective in advancing conditions for working people.

“For most people, unless they have someone in their family who has been a union member or has been very involved with union work, they have no idea how organized labor has shaped their working world today,” said William Rasmussen, lead curator at the Virginia Historical Society. “This exhibition will show visitors, especially young visitors, that there hasn’t always been a 40-hour work week, minimum wage, health benefits, and required lunch breaks. Thousands of Virginia workers—white, black, male, female, young, old—have sacrificed and suffered to give us the adequate, healthy, and safe working environment that most of us presently enjoy.”

Organized Labor in Virginia features more than 75 items, including photographs, union agreements, boycott notices, charters for union groups and associations, membership certificates, plaques and badges, meeting notes, and propaganda posters. A dozen small narratives—spread over time, statewide locations, and different occupations—each encapsulate part of the larger story. The exhibition focuses not only on industrial actions, but also lobbying by unions for improved pay, benefits, working conditions, and social legislation.

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Presenting sponsors for *Organized Labor in Virginia* include Geoff McDonald & Associates and the Virginia AFL-CIO. Additional support for the exhibition was provided by Injured Workers Pharmacy, International Association of Machinist & Aerospace Workers, Teamsters Joint Council No. 83, Michie Hamlett Lowry Rasmussen & Tweel, PLLC, and International Brotherhood of Teamsters.

“The Virginia AFL-CIO has been involved with the Virginia Historical Society on this project since the beginning, which was back in 2007,” said Jim Leaman, President of the Virginia AFL-CIO. “This exhibit gives Virginians the chance to learn about the history of labor struggles and hear the stories of union workers from across the state. I also hope it will encourage people who have been involved in organized labor activities to think about donating their items to the VHS so we can keep educating generations in the future about our hard work.”

Organized Labor in Virginia will be on display at the Virginia Historical Society until December 30, 2010. Admission to the VHS museum is free.

The VHS is offering several programs to accompany the labor exhibition. On November 4 at noon, Scott Nelson will give the Banner Lecture “Steel Drivin’ Man: John Henry, the Untold Story of an American Legend.” On December 1 at 7:00 p.m. Gregg Kimball, Jackie Frost, and Sheryl Warner will present “We Shall Not Be Moved: Virginia Songs of Labor.” There are two gallery walks scheduled for the exhibition. The September 8 walk will be led by William Rasmussen, and the December 1 walk will be given by VHS President and CEO Paul Levensood. Banner Lectures and gallery walks cost \$6/adults, \$5/seniors 55+, \$4/students and children under 18, and are free for VHS members. Reservations are not required.

“Labor unions get a bad rap because people think all they do is strike,” Rasmussen added. “We look at some highly publicized strikes in the exhibition because they brought the plight of the worker to management and to the public, and in that way they advanced the cause of labor. Unions had to be formed and demands had to be made in order to change conditions that no American would consider tolerable. You can’t understand American history without understanding the labor movement.”

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For more than 182 years, the **Virginia Historical Society** (VHS) has been connecting people to America’s past through the unparalleled story of Virginia. The VHS—a history museum and research library—features award-winning exhibitions that are entertaining and educational for visitors of all ages. The Society is the only museum with all of Virginia’s history under one roof—all centuries, all regions, and all topics are covered. Although designated the Official State Historical Society, the VHS is a privately funded non-profit organization that relies on contributions from individuals, corporations, and foundations to sustain its operations. The VHS is located at 428 North Boulevard in Richmond’s Museum District. Admission is free. Museum hours are Monday–Saturday 10 a.m.–5 p.m. and Sunday 1 p.m.–5 p.m. Library hours are Monday–Saturday 10 a.m.–5 p.m. For more information, call (804) 358-4901, visit www.vahistorical.org, or find the VHS on Facebook and Twitter.

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