

This Day in History... August 16, 1894

Birth of George Meany

William George Meany was born on August 16, 1894, in Harlem, New York City. One of the most influential labor leaders in US history, Meany is credited with successfully merging the American Federation of Labor, or AFL, and the Congress of Industrial Labor, or CIO.

The stubbornness that became George Meany's trademark showed itself at an early age. Against his father's wishes, he dropped out of school when he was 16 to work as a plumber's helper. He apprenticed as a plumber for five years before earning his journeyman's certificate with the local 463 Plumber's Union. After his father died and his older brother joined the Army to fight in World War I, Meany became the sole provider for his family. In addition to his work as a plumber, he played semiprofessional baseball as a catcher to earn extra money for the family.

Meany was elected to his union's executive board in 1920 and became its full-time business agent two years later. In 1923, he became secretary of New York City's federation of unions that represented construction workers, the Building Trades Council. In that role, he won a court injunction against an industry lockout. Meany was later made president of the New York State Federation of Labor. During his first year in that position, 72 of the bills he supported became laws. And in 1936, he helped found the American Labor Party.

In 1939, Meany moved to Washington, DC, to serve as the secretary-treasurer of the American Federation of Labor (AFL). He was one of the organization's permanent representatives to the National War Labor Board and boycotted the founding conference of the World Federation of Trade Unions, which he believed was a communist front.

As AFL president William Green's health began to decline in 1951, Meany took on a more responsibilities. Following Green's death in 1952, Meany was unanimously elected president of the AFL. Meany immediately proposed that the AFL merge with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). The CIO had originally been formed by industrial unions that had defected from the AFL, which had largely been controlled by craft unions. Craft unions supported organization of labor based on skills (such as the many separate unions within the railroad industry for engineers, conductors, locomotive firemen, and more). Meanwhile, industry unions supported organizing entire workplaces (such as with the United Mine Workers and the United Auto Workers). It took three years of negotiations, but Meany's goal was achieved in December 1955 when the two federations merged at a joint convention, forming the AFL-CIO. Meany was elected president of the AFL-CIO, a position he held until his retirement in 1979. *Time* magazine called it his "greatest achievement." The AFL-CIO had 15 million members and only about two million US workers were in unions outside of the federation.

A great believer in the cooperation of labor and capital, Meany maintained a strong anti-communist stance and expelled corrupt unions from his organizations. He repeatedly fought against the influence of organized crime in the labor movement and instituted a policy in which any union official who had taken the Fifth Amendment during a corruption investigation couldn't hold a leadership position in their union. In the wake of several scandals, Meany established a code of ethics for the AFL-CIO. According to one historian, "few American union leaders have such a public record of repeated and explicit opposition to corruption."

Meany supported President Lyndon B. Johnson's Vietnam War policies. He also called for "mandatory congressional price hearings for corporations, a technological clearinghouse, and a national planning agency." Meany promoted raising the minimum wage, increasing spending on public works, protecting the rights of union organizing, and universal health care. As the leading spokesman for US labor, he successfully lobbied against discrimination, instituted training programs, and established an apprentice recruitment program. In 1963, Meany received the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Following the death of his wife in March 1979 and a golfing injury that required him to use a wheelchair, Meany retired in November 1979. He died two months later on January 10, 1980, from cardiac arrest.

Meany's career spanned 57 years and eight presidents and was unparalleled in American labor history. He spent a lifetime devoted to American labor unions. And even after he had become president of the nation's largest labor organization, Meany still considered himself a plumber. Upon his death, President Jimmy Carter called Meany "an American institution" and "a patriot."



This stamp was issued on Meany's 100th birthday.



Stamp features the "Labor is Life" mosaic mural at the AFL-CIO headquarters in Washington, DC.



Issued in 1980 to celebrate the American labor movement and its founders.

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