

# United Rubber Workers

**In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, factory workers faced poor working conditions, low wages, and almost no benefits. This was true for the workers employed by rubber manufacturers in Akron, Ohio, such as the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company, B.F. Goodrich, and Firestone. In an attempt to alleviate their conditions, workers went on strike against one of the Akron rubber companies. Striking workers, led by fellow worker Rex Murray, used the concept of the “sit-down” strike. In the past, when workers went on strike they would leave the factory to join picket lines. Company owners often hired “scab” laborers to cross the picket lines and continue production. The practice of using scab labor made it difficult for striking workers to obtain their demands. In contrast, in a sit-down strike, workers quit working but still occupied their places within the factory. This process meant that the factory owners could not send in additional workers to continue the job. In addition, factory management was more reluctant to use private security forces or other strike breakers to intimidate the striking workers, as that approach threatened destruction to plant property.**

In 1935, the rubber workers organized a union which they named the United Rubber Workers (URW). In its first year, the union created thirty-nine local chapters. This unions goals were to improve wages and working conditions for its members, and it soon had its first opportunity. The URW organized its first strike against Goodyear the following year. The strike began as a protest against a plan created by Goodyear to reduce wages and increase the pace of production. Once again, the workers utilized the concept of the sit-down strike. In addition to the sit-down strike, the rubber workers also organized long picket lines in protest. Akrons mayor, Lee D. Schroy, attempted to send in the police to put down the strike, but the police officers refused to do so when they faced the thousands of organized workers. In the long term, Goodyear was forced to recognize the United Rubber Workers and negotiate better contracts with workers.

In the years that followed, the URW continued to grow rapidly. By the late 1930s, the union claimed more than 100,000 members. Legislation passed during the New Deal required industries to recognize unions and legitimized collective bargaining, increasing the URWs popularity and success even further. By the end of World War II, membership had grown to almost 200,000.

After World War II, the United Rubber Workers continued to work to improve laborers conditions. The union began negotiating industry-wide agreements, rather than focusing on just one factory. In addition, the union became more inclusive, working to reduce gender and racial discrimination both within the union itself and the workplace. The URW also negotiated pension plans and insurance plans with employers.

In the 1990s, the United Rubber Workers merged with the United Steelworkers to form an even stronger union. This union still strives to improve its members' working conditions, wages, and benefits.

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