

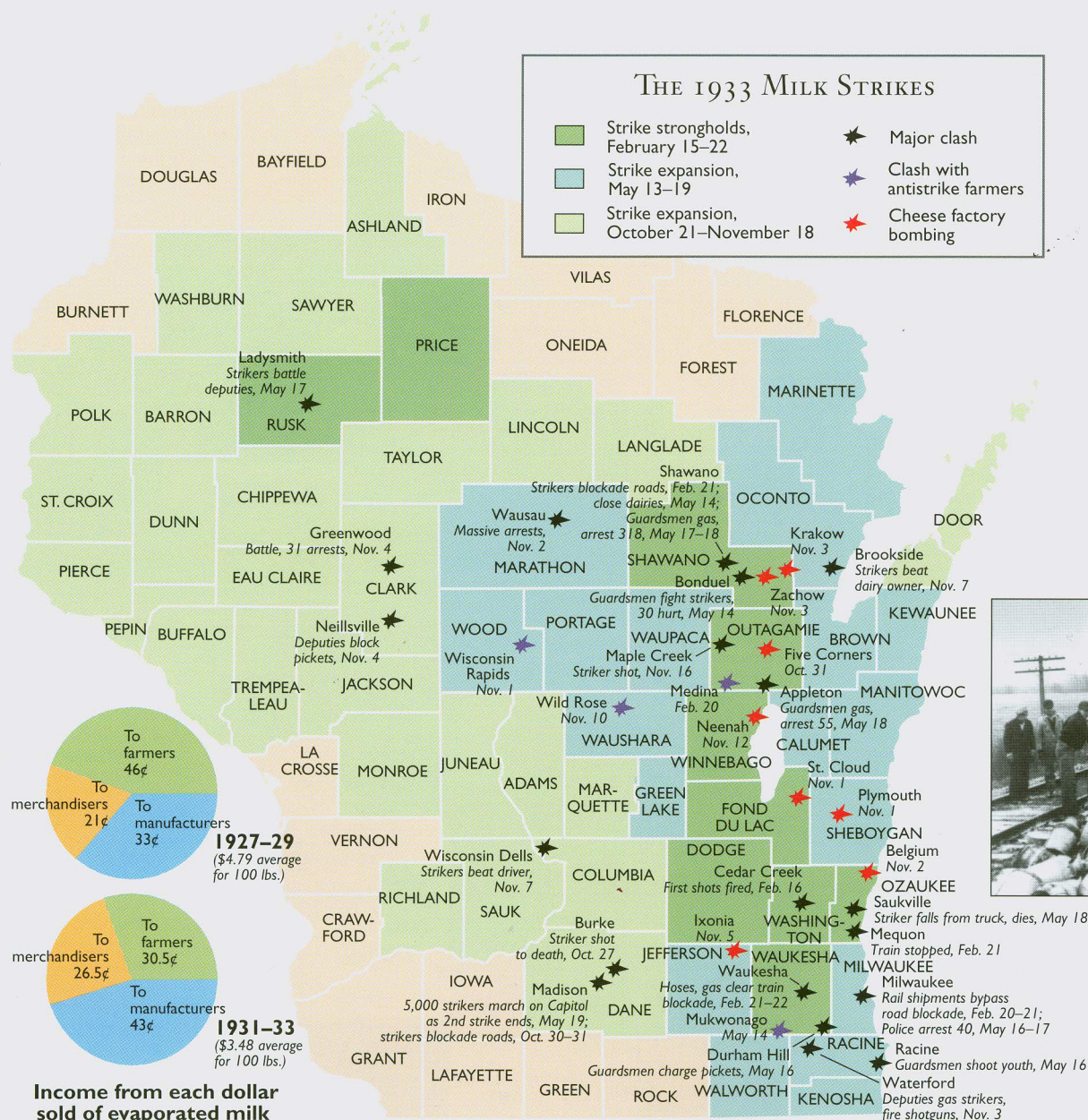
Progressive Era

Progressivism arose in the 1890s from a variety of campaigns for political and social reform, especially those in favor of economic protections for farmers and small business owners. From the Civil War to the 1890s, Wisconsin's political system had been dominated by political "bosses" and machines that played on ethnic and religious divisions. The Republican Party controlled nearly all of Wisconsin, except for some lakeshore counties where Catholic ethnic groups, who tended to vote Democratic, predominated (See *State Government*). Politicians offered voters little in the way of policy, but secured government jobs for their party members and supporters. Each political party had a behind-the-scenes boss who dispensed *patronage* (jobs and favors), perhaps his most important task. The boss controlled day-to-day activities and acted as a go-between for large financial interests. Under this political system, railroads, utilities, and other interests competed for economic advantage, at the expense of small farmers, business owners, and consumers.

Sources of reform. Wisconsin and several other midwestern states had large numbers of northern and western European immigrants who were experienced in political movements, familiar with oppression, and sympathetic to calls for reform. In the 1870s and 1880s, rural political protests arose in the form of the Grange farmers' league, the Greenback Party, and the People's Party (also known as the Populists). They had short-term success, but were not able to attract a large enough urban following to survive. The rise of industrialism and urban population growth in the 1870s and 1880s resulted in a stronger working class, which formed labor unions and socialist parties. Economic recessions, which widened the gaps between rich and poor, and between politicians and their constituents, gave momentum to these movements. An 1872–73 recession bolstered the Grangers, Greenbackers, and Populists, and led to the election of Grange-backed Democrat William R. Taylor as governor (see map on facing page). A severe 1893–98 depression motivated their political

Milk Strikes

In the Great Depression of the 1930s, the prices of farm products dropped, while farmers' production and shipping costs rose (see pie charts). Many dairy farmers who produced milk for cheese and butter were driven into poverty, but the farmers who produced fluid milk for bottling continued to make a living (see *Dairyland*). In 1933, small dairy farmers turned to what they called a "Boston Milk Party." In a series of three strikes, begun by the Wisconsin Cooperative Milk Pool and later joined by the Wisconsin Farmers' Holiday Association, they withheld milk and blocked it from the market (see map at left). The milk strikes began among poorer dairy farmers in eastern Wisconsin, but as government promises to raise prices went unkept, later spread through Wisconsin's dairy belt and into other states. Thousands of small farmers closed dairies, blocked truck and train traffic into major cities, and confiscated and dumped many tons of milk (below). Police and National Guardsmen used tear gas and clubs, deployed machine guns and bayonets, armed antistrike farmers as "deputies," and declared "war zones" around Milwaukee and Shawano. Desperate strikers turned to bombing cheese factories, burning creameries, and pouring oil or kerosene into milk vats. By the end of the year, two Wisconsin strikers had died, and the strike lost support. New Deal farm policies later met some of the farmers' demands. After World War II, many small eastern Wisconsin farms were consolidated into large "agribusiness" holdings. In the 1970s, some dairy farmers symbolically dumped their milk to protest the continuing loss of family farms.

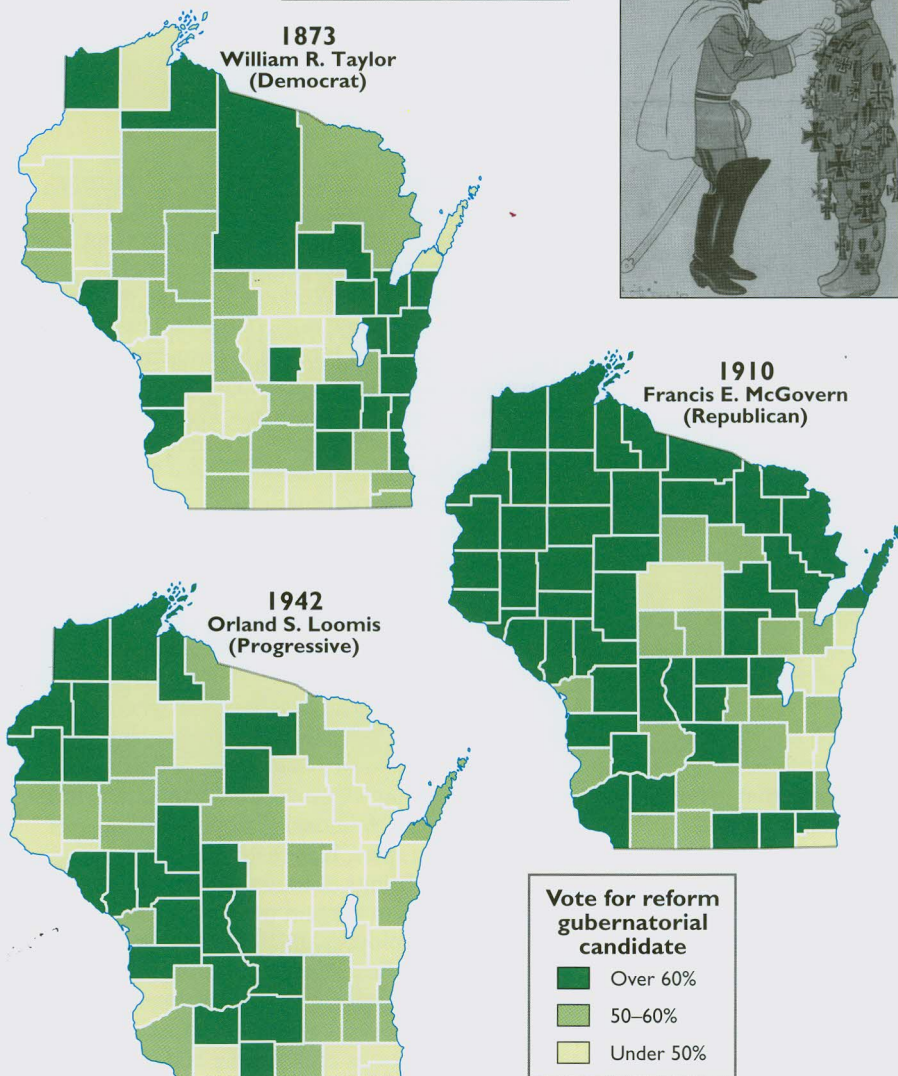


VOTES FOR REFORM

Reform politics in Wisconsin sprang from different parties and regions at different times (see *State Government*). In 1873 Grange-backed William R. Taylor won 55 percent of the vote by opposing railroad corruption. In 1910, Republican Francis E. McGovern won 59 percent at the height of the strength of his progressive faction. In 1942, Progressive Orland S. Loomis won 50 percent against two opponents, just four years before the collapse of the Progressive Party. Though reform politics played a role in shaping these voting patterns, traditional party loyalties and ethnic/religious differences also strongly influenced the distribution of votes.

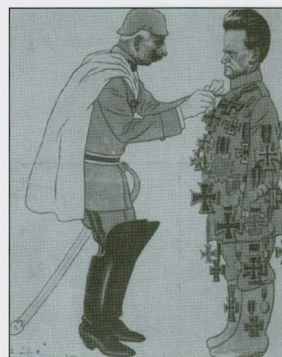
The Wisconsin Idea

The "Wisconsin Idea" is a concept developed in the Progressive Era, and defined in several ways. In the main, it involved the use of experts in drafting legislation and staffing regulatory commissions, together with providing outreach education. The University of Wisconsin was the primary resource for these experts. University President Charles Van Hise and his former classmate Governor Robert M. La Follette, Sr., did much to advance both cooperation and outreach. The most prolific of the experts used by progressive politicians was Professor John Commons. In 1905, he fashioned the state's Civil Service Law, and his later bills on workers' compensation and the Industrial Commission became models for other states (see *Labor*). A major player in the advancement of the Wisconsin Idea was Charles McCarthy, who was appointed as a documents clerk in 1901. From this position, he skillfully created the Legislative Reference Library. Sometimes called the "Bill Factory," it brought together documentary resources, academic and industry experts, and library staff to craft legislation and regulations. Wisconsin's educational system was recast during this period into a wide-ranging set of local, county, state, and vocational schools (see *Education*). By 1912 the Wisconsin Idea had been recognized around the nation. The Wisconsin Idea survived a backlash after the decline of progressivism. Its legacy can still be seen in the University extension system and the Wisconsin Legislative Reference Bureau.



successors, who developed a core following among farmers and small business owners, and cut across many ethnic, class, and party lines. This coalition later came to be called "progressive."

Rise of progressivism. Public disenchantment with "bossism" and unfettered corporate power simmered throughout the 1890s. Frustrated by Republican bossism, Madison attorney and former congressman Robert M. La Follette, Sr., joined the reformers and became their most articulate and popular spokesman. His skillful oratory won national attention. La Follette's failure to receive the 1896 Republican gubernatorial nomination caused his complete break with the party leadership. He and his group of ambitious politicians took up reform causes and formed what came to be known as the progressive wing of the Republican Party. Conservative party members, and moderates who did not care for La Follette's methods, became known as "stalwarts." La Follette's election as governor in 1900 marked the start of the "Progressive Era." His initial reforms included the direct primary, which allowed popular participation in the selection of each party's candidates—a move that struck at the heart of boss politics. Other reforms included railroad regulation, railroad tax reform, and anticorruption legislation—putting Wisconsin on the map as a leader in reform. After he moved to the U.S. Senate in 1906, successive progressive governors employed the "Wisconsin Idea" (see column at left) and enacted reforms including worker safety laws and civil service regulation.



"Fighting Bob"

Separating the history from the legend of "Fighting Bob" La Follette is difficult. In the public's mind, he successfully merged the identity of a movement with his own. He did not start in politics as a reformer, but took up the cause after coming into conflict with corrupt party leadership. Ambitious and dedicated, he tried to create an organization loyal to him rather than to the party. He often saw his enemies, and sometimes his allies, as acting from the worst motives. La Follette's oratory made him a fearsome campaigner and national leader for the progressive movement. Never a liberal in the modern sense, he valued the liberties necessary for the "self-made man." His marriage to Belle Case La Follette—an ardent advocate of women's rights and social justice and an excellent politician—undoubtedly influenced him. He focused on the machinery of democracy—curbing industrial monopolies, unfair taxation, and irresponsible financial power. Adamant about maintaining U.S. neutrality in World War I, he was inaccurately vilified for being "pro-German." (The cartoon above depicts the German leader Kaiser Wilhelm II pinning a medal on La Follette). La Follette's actions sincerely reflected his ideals and those of his constituency, at political and personal cost to himself. He remains the most powerful icon in the history of Wisconsin.

Progressivism falters. Although progressivism grew into a national movement, it was weakened by differences between rival national leaders La Follette and Theodore Roosevelt, as well as by local factions. After stalwarts regained the governorship in 1914, progressivism began to lose momentum. La Follette was severely condemned for his stand on neutrality early in World War I but he rebounded and even ran for president as a Progressive Party candidate in 1924. After his death in 1925, his son Robert, Jr., became senator. In 1930, after the Great Depression began, his younger son Philip was elected governor. Philip's support for unemployment compensation, new labor laws, and government work relief programs received national attention (see *Labor*). Fed up with the stalwarts, Philip and Robert, Jr., left the Republican Party in 1934 and formed a state Progressive Party. While working with Democratic President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the Progressives had helped implement some key New Deal programs. The 1936 formation of the Farmer-Labor Progressive Federation brought the new party into a powerful alliance with farmers' groups, labor unions, and the Socialist Party. After two years of electoral success, the coalition collapsed (when farmers opposed union organizing in food processing plants), and Philip lost the governorship. When he broke with Roosevelt to seek the presidency himself, the Progressive Party began to come apart. After World War II the party dissolved, the La Follettes rejoined the Republican Party, and some younger progressives moved to the Democratic Party.

Industrial Labor Unions

By Zoltán Grossman and Michael Gallagher, in
Wisconsin's Past & Present: A Historical Atlas,
by the Wisconsin Cartographers' Guild
(University of Wisconsin Press, 2002)

From the 1840s to the 1910s, Wisconsin's industrial workers often labored six days a week for 10 to 12 hours a day, often in dangerous conditions, earning from less than a dollar up to two dollars a day. To care for coworkers and their families in case of illness, injury, or death, they formed mutual aid societies. They came together in unions to fight for better working conditions, shorter hours, and higher wages.

1840s–1870s. Wisconsin's first union was founded by Milwaukee construction workers in 1847; the first strike was held by the city's shipbuilders the following year. Early unions were started by skilled workers, such as tailors, cigar makers, railroad engineers, printers, iron workers, and coopers (barrel makers). To reduce union members' power, companies began to employ low-wage workers—particularly women, children, newly arrived immigrants, and later African Americans. Union members objected to these new employees, many of whom later joined unions themselves. During the Civil War unions made gains, but lost many of them in the economic slump that followed. In 1867, Wisconsin shoemakers formed the Knights of St. Crispin, which expanded into the nation's largest union for a brief time. In the 1860s and 1870s, the unions' main demand was for a shorter work day. The national Knights of Labor began organizing in the state in 1878 for an eight-hour day.

1880s–1910s. Lumber was the state's largest industry in 1881, the year that Eau Claire sawmill workers went on strike for a 10-hour day. For the first time, the state deployed militia against strikers. In 1886, Milwaukee workers joined a national strike for an eight-hour day, and at least seven of them were killed (see map at right). Blamed for the violence, the Knights of Labor lost members in Wisconsin. In 1893, the Wisconsin State Federation of Labor was chartered; it was affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and later closely tied to the Socialist Party. Major strikes took place among northern timber and wood workers in the 1890s, among metalworkers and machinists in the early 1900s, and among paper workers in the 1900s–1920s (see map on facing page). Employers fought back by hiring spies and strikebreakers, "locking-out" union workers, hiring nonunion workers, and "blacklisting" fired union workers. They often required new hires to sign "yellow dog contracts" that forbade union membership, formed compliant "company unions," and secured injunctions against strike picketing and product boycotts. Under progressive Republican Governor Francis E. McGovern (1911–15), the long-term struggle for change resulted in new labor laws and an "Industrial Commission" to enforce them. The laws limited child labor, set a minimum wage for women, increased workplace safety, and created the nation's first workers' compensation system for injured employees, and the first state vocational education system (see *Education*).

1920s–1930s. World War I saw another increase in union strength, followed by counterattacks by employers. Many brewery workers lost their jobs

because of Prohibition (see *Southeastern Industries*), and union membership dropped in the 1920s. The labor movement, however, made some important gains, such as the formation of the University of Wisconsin's "School for Workers," and the nation's first lasting ban on yellow dog contracts. The Great Depression of the 1930s brought high unemployment, which initially hurt unions. Partly to prevent social unrest, progressive Governor Philip F. La Follette (see *Progressives*) pushed through new labor laws that provided models for the federal "New Deal." In 1931, the legislature passed a labor code that limited employer injunctions and in 1932 passed the nation's first law for compensating un-employed workers. The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), born in the state in 1936, eventually became one of the nation's largest unions. The Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), founded as a militant rival to the AFL, began organizing auto and metalworking plants—by 1937 the number of strikes in the state had nearly quadrupled, including *sit-down strikes* (plant occupations). That year the Wisconsin Labor Relations Act banned anti-union spies, blacklisting, company unions, and mass firings of union workers, and required employers to bargain with unions chosen by their employees. In 1939, however, conservative Republican Governor Julius Heil took office, and his Employment Peace Act banned sit-down strikes, *closed shops* (compulsory union workplaces), and some forms of picketing and boycotts.

Bay View Massacre

In the 1880s, Milwaukee was the scene of industrial expansion and labor unrest. The city's many new immigrants competed with rural people for jobs that required working at least 10 hours a day. Workers and their unions were divided along ethnic lines and between skilled and unskilled jobs. When unskilled workers organized against harsh working conditions, they were usually replaced. Most strikes lacked support from the chiefly rural public and ended in violence or defeat. Labor unions nevertheless began to overcome these odds. The Eight Hour League, formed in 1886 by Robert Schilling of the Knights of Labor, became the rallying point for reform. Schilling avoided strikes as counter-productive, but militants quickly gained control of the League and planned a national strike for May 1. Thousands of workers took to Milwaukee streets in festive rallies and tense confrontations between May 1 and May 5. Strikers attempted to shut down several plants or force non-striking workers to walk out (see map and chart). In response on May 4, city officials asked Governor Jeremiah Rusk to deploy National Guard units at several plants. On May 5, the day after a strike-related bombing in Chicago's Haymarket Square, tensions escalated. National Guardsmen, nervous and unsure of their orders, opened fire on strikers marching toward the Bay View Rolling Mills—killing seven people and wounding at least ten. The casualties included a boy carrying schoolbooks and an elderly man feeding his chickens. Polish workers felt betrayed by the Polish "Kosciuszko Guards" who had opened fire, while many other citizens considered the guardsmen and the governor to be heroes. Employers voided most existing eight-hour day agreements, and any hope for new concessions was lost until socialists and progressives made gains in the late 1890s.

BAY VIEW MASSACRE, 1886

Saturday, May 1

Milwaukee Journal estimates that 10,000 workers are on strike. Ten percent of the workforce walks out of the Allis Reliance Works. Brewery workers strike for more demands after winning concessions.

Sunday, May 2

Huge demonstrations and a grand parade at the Milwaukee Garden.

Monday, May 3

A crowd of about 1,000 invades the Milwaukee Road Car shops, forcing them to close. Strikers attempt to shut down the Allis Reliance Works, but are turned away by plant workers. Brewery workers march on the Falk Brewery, but fail to produce a strike. Some employees of the Bay View Rolling Mills go out on strike. Governor Rusk arrives and sets up his headquarters at the Plankinton House.

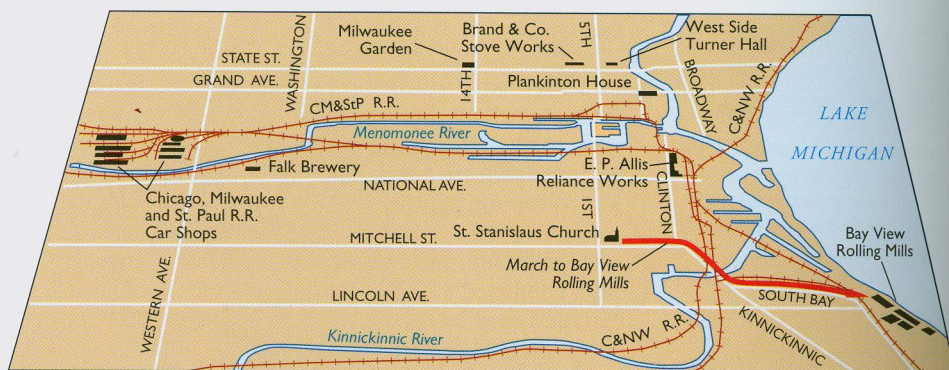
Schilling's meeting at the West Side Turner Hall fails to calm leaders on both sides.

Tuesday, May 4

Mass meeting at the Milwaukee Garden, followed by a march to Brand & Co. Stove Works, forcing it to close. A large crowd marches from St. Stanislaus Church to Bay View Rolling Mills. After a tense confrontation, National Guardsmen are deployed. They include the Kosciuszko Guards, whose involvement angers the mostly Polish strikers. Guardsmen fire warning shots.

Wednesday, May 5

A crowd of about 1,500 returns to the Bay View Rolling Mills from St. Stanislaus Church. After consulting the governor, the National Guard commander warns the crowd to stop at over 400 yards. Guardsmen open fire at about 200 yards, killing seven and wounding more than ten.



Auto, transportation equipment workers
 Eau Claire 1919 (Gillette Rubber)
 Janesville 1937 (Fisher Body), 1945–46 (General Motors), 1961 (Fisher/GM), 1970 (GM)
 Kenosha 1933–34 (Nash Motor)
 Milwaukee 1934 (Seaman Body Corp.), 1974/1983 (Briggs & Stratton), 1974 (Harley-Davidson), 1992 (Teledyne Wisconsin Motors)
 Racine 1934 (Nash Motor)
 Stoughton 1988 (Stoughton Trailers)

Brewers
 Milwaukee 1886, 1888, 1948, 1953, 1993

Cigar makers
 Milwaukee 1881–82

Clothing, garment makers
 Kenosha 1928–29 (Allen-A Hosiery)
 Milwaukee 1853/1860 (tailors), 1855 (shoemakers), 1879 (tanners), 1911/1928 (clothing makers), 1937 (Oshkosh 1915 glove makers)
 Racine 1991 (Rainfair)

Communications workers
 Madison 1973 (Channel 3)
 Milwaukee 1883 (telegraphers)
 Statewide 1947 (telephone workers)

Construction workers
 Madison 1904, 1948
 Milwaukee 1847 (bricklayers), 1889

Coopers (barrel makers)
 Milwaukee 1848, 1866, 1868, 1872

Dockworkers
 Milwaukee 1880, 1881, 1971
 Superior 1984 (Fraser Shipyards)

Electrical workers
 Milwaukee 1969–70 (General Electric)
 Waukesha 1969–70 (General Electric)
 Wausau 1937, 1950 (Marathon Electric)

Food processing workers, meatpackers
 Cambria 1969 (Fall River Canning)
 Chippewa Falls 1973 (Packerland)
 Cudahy 1978, 1987–88 (Patrick Cudahy)
 Franksville 1937 (canners)
 Madison 1934 (Oscar Mayer), 1972–73 (General Beverage)
 Milwaukee 1886 (bakers), 1878 (flour millers), 1968 (meatpackers), 1978 (Peck)
 Wautoma 1967 (Libby)

Machinists
 Beloit 1903 (Berlin Machine Works), 1972 (Beloit Corp.)
 Cudahy 1901
 Green Bay 1988 (Krueger), 1983 (G.B. Paper Converting), 1994 (Alwin)
 Madison 1970 (Gisholt)
 Milwaukee 1901, 1906, 1937 (Lindemann-Hoverson), 1937/1938 (Harnischfeger), 1941/1946–47 (Allis-Chalmers), 1974 (A.O. Smith)
 Port Washington 1990 (Simplicity)
 Racine 1899/1902/1905–7/1934–35/1936–37/1945–47/1960/1990 (J.I. Case Co.), 1992 (Acme Die Casting), 1993 (Dumore)
 West Allis 1947 (Allis Chalmers), 1992 (Pressed Steel Tank), 1996 (Siemens)

Metalworkers
 Beloit 1902 (Fairbanks-Morse), 1903
 Green Bay 1971/1976 (FMC)
 Madison 1919
 Milwaukee 1876/1879 (coal heavers), 1873 (heaters), 1899, 1902, 1906–7 (molders), 1873, 1881, 1882, (ironworkers), 1994 (Ampco Metals)

Papermakers
 Appleton 1902, 1904
 Biron 1902
 Brokaw 1902
 Combined Locks 1904
 De Pere 1987
 Eau Claire 1902
 Green Bay 1921
 Kaukauna 1892, 1902, 1922
 Marinette 1902
 Neenah-Menasha 1902, 1904, 1922, 1992
 Nekoosa-Port Edwards 1902, 1919–22
 Plover 1902
 Rhinelander 1921–22
 Stevens Point 1902
 Wausau 1992
 Whiting 1902
 Wisconsin Rapids 1902

1940s–1960s. Unemployment dropped during World War II, and unions voluntarily limited most strikes. Prices rose after the war, but wages stayed the same, sparking a series of bitter strikes in machinery and metalworking plants, such as J. I. Case, Kohler, and Allis-Chalmers. Later, a telephone workers' strike made unions more visible in smaller towns where they were scarce. In 1946 the Progressive Party collapsed, and CIO members expelled union leaders they believed were tied to the Communist Party. Unions increasingly supported the state's revitalized Democratic Party. The Wisconsin AFL and CIO merged in 1958, combining over 1,100 union locals. The AFL-CIO has played a strong political role in the state, contributing to political candidates and lobbying for new labor laws. A 1959 state law backed public employees' right to organize.



Strike at J. I. Case Company in Racine, 1960

1970s–1990s. With a decline in industrial employment, public employee unions took a more central role in the labor movement. A 1974 teachers' strike in Hortonville led the legislature to pass a binding arbitration law in 1977 that required employers and unions to settle strikes. Union membership declined in the 1980s, because of a growth of nonunion service and high-tech industries and changes in federal labor policies. In what unionists opposed as "runaway shops," some Wisconsin companies began to shift production plants and subcontracts to nonunion Sunbelt states and low-wage Third World countries. Some Wisconsin unions carried out successful organizing drives and strikes into the 1990s, which often focused on job security or health and safety issues rather than wages. Wisconsin unions still remain among the strongest in the nation.

Plumbers, plumbing equipment workers
 Kohler 1897, 1934–41/1954–60 (Kohler Co.)
 Madison 1903 (plumbers)
 Milwaukee 1885 (plumbers)

Printers, publishing/newspaper workers
 Green Bay 1976
 Madison 1977 (Madison Newspapers, Inc.), 1983 (Straus Printing)
 Milwaukee 1852, 1863, 1872, 1881, 1882, 1884, 1907, 1936, 1961 (Journal), 1962 (Sentinel)
 Neenah-Menasha 1976 (Banta)

Public employees
 Milwaukee 1966 (Sewage District), 1967 (Milwaukee County)
 Statewide 1977 (State of Wisconsin)

Railroad, streetcar workers
 La Crosse 1909
 Milwaukee 1853/1877/1880/1881/1885 (railroads), 1892 (Homestead), 1894 (Pullman), 1896, 1912, 1934
 Stevens Point 1872

Retail, restaurant, hotel workers
 Milwaukee 1934 (Boston Store), 1937

Sailors
 Milwaukee 1851, 1862, 1864
 Mississippi River 1866 (steamboats)

Shipbuilders
 Milwaukee 1848, 1861

Teachers
 Beloit 1973, 1976
 Hortonville 1974
 Kenosha 1972, 1973
 Madison 1970/1976/1980 (U.W. teaching assistants), 1976
 Milwaukee 1977
 Racine 1973, 1977
 Superior 1969, 1970, 1973, 1976
 Wausau 1971
 West Allis 1971
 Wisconsin Rapids 1971, 1974

Timber, lumbering, wood workers
 Ashland 1890
 Chippewa Falls 1898
 Eagle River 1881, 1892
 Eau Claire 1892
 La Crosse 1873, 1892
 Manawa 1892
 Marinette 1885–86, 1892, 1899, 1903, 1904, 1916
 Merrill 1892
 Neenah-Menasha 1885, 1896, 1897, 1899, 1904
 Oshkosh 1864, 1898, 1920
 Pineville 1885
 Rhinelander 1892
 Schofield 1892
 Sheboygan 1899–1900
 Stevens Point 1892
 Two Rivers 1900
 Washburn 1890
 Wisconsin Rapids 1892
 Woodboro 1892

Truckers, delivery workers
 Statewide 1970 (U.S. Postal Service), 1974 (truckers), 1983 (Greyhound Bus), 1997 (United Parcel Service)



Certain strikes by workers, and lockouts of union members by management, have galvanized Wisconsin's labor movement. Although most strikes were directed by one union against one company, others involved multiple unions, multiple companies, or even (in the case of general strikes) multiple trades. Some unions repeated strikes numerous times until their demands were met or the unions were broken. Hundreds of strikes not listed on this chart also played a role in changing workplaces.