



New American Federation of Labor By the People Crowdsourced Transcription Campaign Launched

Posted on May 9, 2023 by Ryan Reft

A new *By the People* crowdsourced transcription campaign, “American Federation of Labor Records: Letters in the Progressive Era,” launched in late April. By taking part in the campaign, volunteers will discover how the labor union engaged with issues of race, class, and gender during the early twentieth century.

On April 26, 2023, the Library launched a new *By the People* crowdsourcing transcription campaign: “[American Federation of Labor Records: Letters in the Progressive Era](#).”

The transcription campaign represents a selection of materials from the Manuscript Division’s [American Federation of Labor Records](#), which are [available online](#). The records, consisting predominantly of correspondence between longtime AFL leader Samuel Gompers and union officials, labor advocates, union branches, workers, politicians, and others, provide a window into the intersections of gender, race, and ethnicity.

One of the central tensions in American history is that between labor and capital. In arguably the world's most robust capitalist economy, the struggle between these two forces has persisted throughout every era.

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the [American Federation of Labor](#) (AFL) attempted to organize the nation's growing workforce as historic levels of immigration, urbanization, and industrialization reshaped the United States. Led by Samuel Gompers from the mid-1860s until his death in 1924, the AFL became the largest union of its day, while also balancing the interests of a diverse workforce speaking numerous languages, growing political power in Washington, D.C., and its own internal contradictions and biases as an organization.]



Delegation from American Federation of Labor, White House, Washington, D.C. Harris and Ewing, between 1921 and 1924, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

In 2021, [Archives, History and Heritage Advanced](#) Internship Program intern [Mills](#)

[Pennebaker](#) focused on the International Ladies Garment Workers Union Strike (1909), the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire (1911), and Red Summer (1919) as datapoints around which to document AFL engagement, or lack thereof, on issues of gender, race, and ethnicity. Pennebaker examined over 6,000 pieces of correspondence and discovered numerous incidents of the AFL wrestling with these and other issues.

“The ILGWU strike, Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, and Red Summer provided helpful starting points for scrutinizing the AFL’s records, but there is still much work to be done with this collection,” Pennebaker noted in a [blog post](#) reflecting on her research. Following Pennebaker’s guidance, the Library’s [By the People](#) project organized the new campaign “American Federation of Labor: Letters in the Progressive Era.” Volunteers who take part in transcribing these selections from the AFL correspondence will assist in creating word searchable text related to the AFL’s engagement with and policies regarding women workers, immigrant labor, and race.

Capitalizing on Pennebaker’s earlier example, volunteers will focus on documents related to the same three events:

- [International Ladies Garment Workers Union Strike 1909-1910: January 1909-May 1910](#)
- [The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, March 11, 1911: January 1911 - January 1912](#)
- [Red Summer April 1919 - September 1919: January 1919 - January 1920](#)

However, in order to better capture the political and social history preceding and following each event, volunteers will review a larger subset of documents, within an expanded timeframe, than Pennebaker was able to examine during her internship.

By transcribing this selection of the AFL Records, volunteers will help illuminate how women, African Americans, Asians and Asian Americans, Latinos and Latino Americans, and others built and maintained not only the great industrial might of this nation, but also furthered its democratic underpinnings by ensuring workers of all races and backgrounds gained living wages and occupational and civil rights. Amplifying the long history of labor organizing is more important than ever for today’s increasingly diverse workforce.

This post originally appeared on the Library of Congress blog, [Unfolding History](#).

Image: Delegation from American Federation of Labor, White House, Washington, D.C.
Harris and Ewing, between 1921 and 1924, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

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