

Handout 2: Participating in the Political Process

How does a democracy provide opportunities for individuals to participate in the political process?

Directions: Read the three sources below and then answer the questions on Handout 3.

Source 1



Courtesy of U.S. House of Representatives
Representative Mary T. Norton at her desk

Starting in the mid-1800s, more people began moving to cities to work in factories, stores, and other industries. Employers often required workers to work for long periods of time, sometimes for 12 hours each day, six days a week. At the time, workers typically worked 55 hours each week.

By the late 1800s, workers began to join together to change their working conditions. They wanted to reduce the number of hours they worked to 40 hours per week. Workers formed labor unions, which are organizations that help to protect workers' rights. One such union is the American Federation of Labor. The American Federation of

Labor organized workers to go on strike, or stop working temporarily, to achieve better working conditions. By going on strike, workers showed their employers how important the workers were to a company. This is what the workers from the Woolworth department store in New York did (see Handout 1). Some people did not support labor unions because the strikes these groups organized interrupted daily life. Most employers also opposed labor unions because they had to spend more money to improve working conditions to meet worker demands. However, a 1936 poll showed that 72% of people living in the United States approved of labor unions.

Labor unions wanted to prevent employers from requiring an employee to work more than 40 hours per week at one job. They began to work with lawmakers to create a bill and pass a national law that would limit the number of hours an employee could be required to work. In addition, workers and lawmakers wanted a law that would set a national minimum hourly wage.

Workers found an ally in Representative Mary T. Norton, a lawmaker from New Jersey. Representative Norton was first elected to Congress in 1926, only six years after women gained the right to vote and run for elected office. During her 26 years in office, she chaired four different House committees, spending eight years as chair of the Labor Committee. She collaborated with labor unions and other lawmakers to write and bring a bill to the House floor for a vote. It took many years, but the Fair Labor Standards Act was signed into federal law in 1938, establishing a 40-hour work week.

Source 2

The following excerpt from a letter was written in 1938 to the Secretary of Labor, Frances Perkins, by a member of an interest group. The interest group wanted to discuss the working conditions of a group of farm workers in San Antonio, Texas.

March 11, 1938

[Dear] Mrs. Frances Perkins,

[W]e hope that it will be possible for you to find time to meet with a committee of San Antonio citizens interested in the problems of the pecan workers. . . .

Please let us know if such a meeting will be possible and at what time you will be available so we can make complete arrangements.

Very truly yours,
Citizens Labor Aid Committee
Mrs. Britton,
Secretary

San Antonio, Texas

Source 3

President Franklin D. Roosevelt gave a speech on Labor Day in 1938 after the passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act. An excerpt of that speech is shown.

A big part of my duty as President has been to do what I could to bring our people together again. . . . The great test for us in our time is whether all the groups of our people are willing to work together for continuing progress. . . .

What I or any one man may do is of a small moment compared with what the people do. In this effort to preserve our democracy and our Union, I am confident that all who labor in field and factory will carry on the good work.