
137. Steel Workers Organizing Committee, a New Declaration of Independence (1936)

Source: Steel Workers Organizing Committee: "Declaration of Independence by United Steel Workers of America," Steel Labor, August 1, 1936. Reprinted by permission of United Steelworkers.

The most striking development of the mid-1930s was the mobilization of millions of workers in mass production industries that had successfully resisted unionization. Previous depressions had devastated the labor movement. Unlike in the past, however, the federal government now seemed to be on the side of labor, as reflected in the Wagner Act of 1935, which granted workers the legal right to form unions.

In that year, labor leaders dissatisfied with the American Federation of Labor's policy of organizing workers along traditional craft lines called for

the creation of unions that united all workers in a specific industry. One such effort was the Steel Workers Organizing Committee, later the United Steelworkers of America. On July 4, 1936, 4,000 steelworkers gathered at Homestead, Pennsylvania, the site in 1892 of one of the most bitter strikes in American history, to claim their "inalienable rights," including the right to form a union. Modeled on the Declaration of Independence, their manifesto outlined the extreme tactics employers used to prevent unionization. In 1937, U.S. Steel, the country's single most important business firm, agreed to recognize the new steel workers' union.

ON JULY FOURTH, 1776, the American people declared their independence of political tyranny from which they had long suffered. They pledged themselves to protect the right of all to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

DESPOTISM OF THE LORDS OF STEEL

But today we find the political liberty for which our forefathers fought is made meaningless by economic inequality. In the steel and other like industries a new despotism has come into being.

Through their control over the hours we work, the wages we receive, and the conditions of our labor, and through their denial of our right to organize freely and bargain collectively, the Lords of Steel try to rule us as did the royalists against whom our forefathers rebelled.

COMPANY UNIONS, SPIES, THUGS

They have interfered in every way with our right to organize in independent unions, discharging many who have joined them.

They have set up company unions, forcing employees to vote in their so-called elections.

They have sent among us swarms of stoolpigeons, who have spied upon us in the mills, in our meetings, and even in our homes.

They have kept among us armies of company gunmen, with stores of machine guns, gas bombs, and other weapons of warfare.

COMPANIES HEED NO APPEAL—

In every stage of these oppressions we have petitioned for redress in the most humble terms.

We have used every channel of the so-called representation to put forward our requests and grievances. But all we have found is that the employers control these plans and refuse to grant requests which are not backed by independent organizations.

—OR LAW

We have appealed to the government to protect us in our right to organize freely without interference from our employers.

We have presented cases of interference and discrimination without number to government labor boards. They have ruled that our employers must observe the law by reinstating discharged unionists and ceasing to interfere with their employees' rights. But our employers have defied these rulings.

WE ARE AMERICANS!

So we steel workers do today solemnly publish and declare our independence. We say to the world: "We are Americans." We shall exercise our inalienable rights to organize into a great industrial union, banded together with all our fellow steel workers.

WE PLEDGE OUR LIVES—

Through this union, we shall win higher wages, shorter hours, and a better standard of living. We shall win leisure for ourselves, and opportunity for our children. Together with our union brothers in

other industries, we shall abolish industrial despotism. We shall make real the dreams of the pioneers who pictured America as a land where all might live in comfort and happiness.

In support of this declaration, we mutually pledge to each other our steadfast purpose as union men, our honor and our very lives.

Questions

1. How do the workers appeal to American nationalism in pressing their claims?
 2. How are the language and form of the document consciously modeled on the Declaration of Independence of 1776?
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