

## 1.2: Economic Justice is Valuing Work!

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### Economic Justice

Productive work creates and drives economies. Economies are about the efficient use of trade, capital, natural and human resources. The term 'economic justice' will be defined and described centering on the discussion of the history of work in the US and its association with worker safety.

[Investopedia](#) defines 'economic justice' as a component of social justice and welfare economics. It is a set of moral and ethical principles for building economic institutions, where the ultimate goal is to create an opportunity for each person to establish a sufficient material foundation upon which to have a dignified, productive, and creative life.

Much of the prior discussion has focused on human experiences and functions of society norms. The history of work in the US also includes government, commercial, and private institutions, regulatory and organizational structures. Most forms of government exists to provide order and to promote the common good.

Recognizing commerce and commercial enterprise garnered most of the attention of lawmakers who afforded the most protection to business and industry, advocates for labor began making waves immediately after the American Civil War in 1864. As referenced from historical text, government oversight of labor practices was initiated...when William Sylvis, the most important labor leader of his day, advocated for the creation of a Department of Labor (DOL). He protested that existing government departments threw their protective arms around every enterprise fostering wealth, while no department had as its "sole object the care and protection of labor." He and his followers petitioned President Andrew Johnson for a Secretary of Labor, chosen from the ranks of workingmen, to be labor's voice in the Cabinet.

It took nearly 50 years before an American President, Andrew Taft, signed a bill creating a cabinet level Department of Labor in 1913. The DOL established a bureau of labor statistics (BLS) to provide objective labor data not influenced by national politics. It took many more decades later for the BLS to not be influenced by social norms and today there is relative assurance that labor data is unbiased and accurate. The BLS provides important statistics on what is happening in workplaces such as pay and benefits, unemployment numbers, injury and illness data, employment projections, and productivity.

So, why is the DOL relevant to a discussion on economic justice and its ties to worker safety? In addition to the BLS, the DOL has under its arm a number of agencies such as the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA), the Office of Workers Compensation Programs (OWCP), the Office of Labor-Management Standards (OLMS), the Wage and Hour Division (WHD), and the Employment and Training Administration (ETA). Of course OSHA and MSHA are centered on worker health and safety, however the other agencies collectively provide for ensuring a skilled and trained workforce, an ethically managed workforce, and a fairly compensated workforce.



Figure 1.2.1: A Skilled Craftsman and assorted tools (Copyright; Pixabay)

### Unions and Skilled Labor

The history of work in the US would not be complete without mention of unions. Many who will review this textbook may, if not currently union members, join a union sometime in the future. Skilled labor professionals are the primary beneficiaries of labor unions with the first documented US trade union formed in 1794, the Federal Society of Journeymen Cordwainers (Shoemakers). So what exactly is a union?

[Investopedia](#) states labor unions are associations of workers formed to protect workers' rights and advance their interests. Unions negotiate with employers through a process known as collective bargaining. The resulting union contract specifies workers' pay, hours, benefits, and job health-and-safety policies.

Modern union contracts also add provisions for education, training, and certification requirements as well as stipulations for adverse or disciplinary actions and probationary waiting periods for full union benefits. The first trade unions were no different from most early American institutions in their exclusionary, discriminatory practices and denial of membership to ethnic minorities, African Americans, Asian Americans, and women. The first trade unions did not value all workers. Groups excluded from the membership of unions supporting only Anglo-Saxon and Protestant males, formed their own unions. During the civil rights years unions saw some relaxation of exclusionary practices however even at peak union membership in the 1980s, minorities and women were still underrepresented in some of the largest trade unions. There is still work to do in this area and promoted by active recruitment of women and minorities.

A number of the largest trade unions associated with skilled labor professionals include the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), International Association of Bridge, Structural, Ornamental and Reinforcing Iron Workers Ironworkers (IW), International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers (SMART), United Association of Journeymen and Apprentices of the Plumbing and Pipe Fitting Industry of the United States and Canada (UA), United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America International Union (UAW), United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America (UBC), United Steelworkers (USW), International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM), and American Nurses Association (ANA).

Labor unions not trade oriented include the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE), Service Employees International Union (SEIU), International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT), and the Fraternal Order of Police (FOP) just to name a few. These are fully funded and influential unions often joining together on the national stage supporting legislation that implements labor policy favorable to workers.

Trade unions have played an important role in creating and elevating the economic status of the poor and working class to the middle class. Trade unions fight for safe working conditions and are responsible for helping to formulate many of the health and safety standards presented in this textbook. Unions continue to provide input and content for education requirements and training programs establishing trade certification and safety guidelines. Unions elevate the trades through apprenticeship programs supporting competitive living wages, bargaining for favorable retirement benefits, and advocating for superior medical benefits not often available to the average worker. Unions reduce wage inequality because they raise wages more for low- and middle-wage workers than for higher-wage workers, more for blue-collar than for white-collar workers, and more for workers who do not have a college degree. Strong unions set a pay standard that nonunion employers follow. Labor unions have been good for the trades and nonunion alike and crucial to economic justice despite exclusionary practices in the formative years.



Figure 1.2.2 Logo for California Teachers Association (Copyright; CTA)

### Community College and Trade Schools

A persistent and equally effective means for economic justice is the community college and trade school. Community colleges and trade schools prepare workers with the education and training needed to enter the workforce as skilled laborers and excel in high paying and rewarding careers. The history of work in the US would not be complete without bringing attention to the alternative that low cost career and technical education programs have presented for improving living standards and skilled worker outcomes. Free, low cost, or subsidized training programs offer a good return on investment and are well suited for introducing students/workers to workplace safety standards and the methods for developing safe work practices and sustaining safe workplaces.

Fair pay, living wages, education and training, safe and healthy working conditions are core tenets upon which to correlate economic justice to worker safety. So how are healthy working conditions established? What are the criteria for worker safety and health? We will discuss in the next section how our desire to protect the environment addresses these questions.

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