

WABASH VALLEY

P R O F I L E S

A series of tributes to hometown people and events that have shaped our history.

The American Federation of Labor

On Aug. 3, 1881, the American Federation of Labor — the nation's most powerful labor organization — was born.

The birthplace — site of a two-day national convention designed to unite all North American trade unions into one coalition — was the former Baldwin Presbyterian Church at the northeast corner of Fifth and Ohio streets in Terre Haute. The one-time place of worship was being used as the Central Temperance Union meeting hall.

Delegates from 13 craft unions representing 40,000 skilled workers from major eastern cities rallied there on Aug. 2, devised a national superstructure and assigned committee responsibilities. Before adjourning, they resolved to meet in three months at Pittsburgh with a comprehensive charter and organizational plan.

The group initially called itself the "National Trade Union Congress." It became the "Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions of the U.S. and Canada" before the group officially adopted the title "American Federation of Labor." In 1886, Samuel Gompers, union leader for Cigarmakers International, became executive director, a position he held — except one year — until his death in 1924. Gompers' suggested constitutional revisions allowed dues to be collected for office maintenance, staff salaries and certificates for member councils.

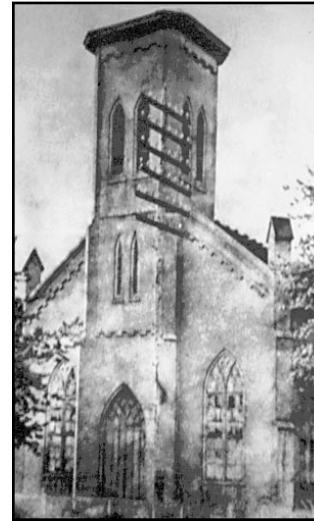
His child's death prevented Gompers' presence at the Terre Haute meeting. The Terre Haute Amalgamated Labor Union was the official host. Local bricklayer John R. Backus was the temporary chairman; Terre Haute carpenter Edward Pagette was the first secretary. John E. Coughlin, president of the National Tanners and Curriers Union of Chicago, was elected the permanent convention chairman and W. C. Pollner of the Cleveland Trades Assembly became secretary.

Treasurer Mark W. Moore of the Terre Haute Typographical Union held an essential position, dispersing brochures to announce the Indiana gathering, formulating post-meeting memoranda to describe the "Terre Haute Resolution," and notifying unions to attend the Nov. 15 assembly in Pittsburgh. He also conceived the organization's motto: "Agitate! Educate! Consolidate!"

The Terre Haute conclave was inspired by Lyman A. Brant of Detroit, the International Typographical Union secretary. Peter J. McGuire of St. Louis, known as the "father of Labor Day," represented the Brotherhood of Carpenters. Samuel L. Leffingwell, founder of the Indianapolis Trades Assembly, played a significant role and later created the Indiana Federation of Labor.

Uninvited to Terre Haute was Terrence V. Powderly, president of the Knights of Labor, a secretive national association prone to internal upheaval. His associates attended the Pittsburgh convention. Gompers ultimately exploited Powderly's mistakes to entice labor groups from the Knights to the AFL.

The host structure for the historic Terre Haute meeting was razed in August 1884.



TERRE HAUTE

(812) 238-6000



NATIONAL BANK

Always Close to Home