William Sylvis Biography

William Sylvis

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Biography

American labor leader William Sylvis (1828-1869) pioneered many trade union methods and was the guiding spirit behind the first attempt to form a united trade union movement.

William Sylvis was born in Armagh, Pa., on Nov. 26, 1828, of hopelessly poor parents. He had 3 months of formal schooling; it has been said that he learned to write only after becoming secretary of a local union, obligated to correspond with other locals. He was an iron molder by trade and as a young man held part ownership in a foundry. In 1852 he married and moved to Philadelphia. He became secretary of the iron molders' union in Philadelphia in 1857 and, 2 years later, helped organize the Iron Molders International Union.

Sylvis led a movement of workingmen opposed to war, but when the Civil War began, he helped to recruit for the army. However, his chief interest remained unionism. "I love this Union cause," he wrote, "I hold it more dear than I do my family or my life. I am willing to devote to it all that I am or have or hope for in this world." In 1863, elected president of the Molders Union, Sylvis almost single-handedly built it into the most significant labor organization of its time. In 1862 he undertook the first nationwide organizational drive, personally traveling over 10,000 miles. He built the union from 2,000 members in 15 locals with a treasury of $1,600 to 6,000 members, 54 locals, and $25,000.

Sylvis was an excellent administrator. He insisted on centralized structure so that locals could not strike without national agreement, introduced a per capita tax to build up strike funds, issued union cards, and urged a closed shop where possible. Sylvis disliked strikes as representing too great a sacrifice but sanctioned them as a last resort. He also encouraged workers' cooperatives.

In 1866 Sylvis assisted in founding the first united trade union, the National Labor Union (NLU). He became its president in 1868. Although the father of practical business unionism in the United States, he advocated numerous reform measures and independent political action. He also advocated international labor cooperation and tried unsuccessfully to send a delegate to the Lausanne conference of the First International in 1867. In 1869 the NLU was represented at the annual meeting. At the time of his death at the age of 41, he was urging the formation of a national Labor Reform party.