

Jimmy Hoffa

James Riddle Hoffa, one of America's foremost labor organizers, was born into an Indiana coal-mining family in 1913. When Hoffa was six, his father died, and in 1924 the family moved to Detroit's west side. Hoffa dropped out of school and went to work for Kroger Grocery. It was here that he called his first strike – and won.

Soon Hoffa was organizing for the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, which elected him president in 1957. A few years later he negotiated the National Master Freight Agreement, followed by similar pacts for other trades and crafts within the Teamsters union.

Hoffa had Mafia connections and made transactions that brought him under federal scrutiny. He was eventually convicted in 1964 on several charges. President Richard Nixon pardoned him in 1971, stipulating that he avoid any further union activity.

While negotiating to regain the Teamsters' presidency in 1975, Hoffa disappeared from a parking lot in Bloomfield Township and was never seen again. He was presumed kidnapped and murdered by mobsters who did not want him back in the union. In 1995, his two children held a memorial service for him. His disappearance has become perhaps the century's most famous unsolved mystery.



Jimmy Hoffa's Detroit

The Hoffa family was part of a tremendous influx of people to Detroit during the 1920s, as the city's population grew to 1.5 million residents. By 1930, the city had expanded to its current 139 square miles and was the fourth-largest city in the nation.

Detroit was a factory town. A large majority of the population were industrial laborers – neither a safe nor secure occupation. Out of the desperation caused by the Great Depression, trade unions began to grow.

The 1930s were difficult times for union organizers. Police forces were used to quell strikes and enforce lockouts. Companies placed informants within union ranks to ferret out the “troublemakers” in their plants. Workers claimed they could be beaten for simply discussing unions – yet they joined by the thousands.

During World War II, trade unions cooperated with the war effort. Afterward the union movement grew increasingly powerful and Detroit became the hub of national labor activity. Union members were eventually accepted as active partners in American industry.



Hero?

James R. “Jimmy” Hoffa did not entirely fit the stereotype of the union leader. He did not smoke, drink or pursue similar diversions. During his time as president of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (1957 to 1967), Hoffa was one of the most recognizable leaders in the American labor movement.

Often vilified in government investigations and the press, Hoffa nevertheless remained very popular with the union rank and file. They respected him as their champion, and working conditions and the terms of contracts continually improved under his leadership.

The early years were tough. He fought strikebreakers and police – literally – with physical strength. Recognized for his formidable drive and ability, he built the Teamsters into one of the largest unions in the United States. In 1964 Hoffa’s organization was able to secure the first nationwide trucking contract.

Hoffa was also considered a skilled tactician at the bargaining table. He practiced classic “bread and butter” unionism targeting wages, benefits and job security. Hoffa was credited with raising the standard of living for the majority of truck drivers working in the United States. As one observer put it, “Hoffa’s economic record is hard to fault.”



Villain?

During the middle of the last century, the general public's perception of Jimmy Hoffa as a labor leader could basically be summed up in two words – graft and dishonesty. He was known to have close ties with members of organized crime, a charge he never denied. Using schemes that were widely viewed as amoral if not outright illegal, Hoffa often enriched himself at the expense of the rank-and-file workers.

Hoffa owned several trucking businesses that benefited directly from patronage from the trucking industry and the Teamsters. He stated that he saw no conflict in a union leader operating a business in the same industry as his union.

“Loans” were provided to Hoffa's organized crime associates for various business ventures, with portions of the money being skimmed from Teamster pension funds. Some of these associates also ran rackets – illegal gambling schemes – out of Teamsters union local offices.

Jimmy Hoffa was often the target of U.S. Justice Department investigations, but he avoided serious legal trouble until 1964, when he was convicted of fraud and jury tampering. After several failed appeals, he went to prison in 1967. President Richard Nixon, who had received large campaign donations from the Teamsters union, commuted Hoffa's sentence in 1971.

