More important to American workers than the faltering steps taken by the New Deal towards economic recovery was the startling growth of organised labour. The New Deal may have failed to disturb the basic structure of American business, but it did appear to have facilitated the formation of a countervailing force in the trades union movement. The 1930s saw the largest ever growth in union membership in a single decade in both absolute and relative terms: trades union membership trebled; by 1940 23 per cent of the non-agricultural labour force was organised. The gains were to be decisive and permanent: by 1945 the war had consolidated the growth in membership at 25 per cent of the workforce. Thereafter there would be no significant increases.

As important as the size of the growth was its distribution in the economy. In the 1920s organised labour had been hemmed into the railroads, coal mining and the needle trades (all sick industries), and craft unions of skilled workers, particularly in construction. The great majority of semi-skilled and unskilled, often immigrant, workers in the mass production, basic manufacturing industries were unorganised. By 1940 those great centre industries of autos, steel, rubber, and electrical goods, dominated by large national corporations and opposed to organised labour, had been unionised. Labour appeared to have climbed, if not captured, the commanding heights of the economy. At the same time labour’s political position had been transformed. Traditionally, the labour movement had been non-partisan. So weak was the political leverage of the American Federation of Labor in 1933 that Roosevelt had been able blithely to ignore its opposition to his appointment of Frances Perkins as Secretary of Labor. By 1940, however, the unions were an integral part of the Democratic Party: their funds made the largest contribution to the party’s
campaign chest; their members were a crucial element in the New Deal electoral coalition; as war approached, their leaders could demand representation at the highest levels of government policymaking.

1 Government and the union leadership

Two of the most obvious weaknesses of the labour movement before 1933 had been the hostility of the government and the cautious conservatism of the union leaders. Under the New Deal, government and the law came down firmly on the side of union organisation and a dynamic and militant leadership came to the fore in the unions themselves.

Before the New Deal the coercive power of the state had been largely arrayed against labour. Neither the courts nor local, state, or federal governments acted to restrain determined employers from using a battery of anti-union devices: firing and blacklisting union organisers, espionage, violence against strikers, and the use of strikebreakers. Courts willingly issued wide-ranging injunctions that hamstrung union organisers, pickets, and strikers. Local government officials tended to act as an arm of the employer, not only in the mining, steel, and textile communities where a single company dominated the town, but also in more heterogeneous communities where local officials deferred, nevertheless, to the politically powerful middle-class support for employers. Thus, union organisers were harassed, beaten up, and driven out, strikers and their families were denied public and private relief, picket lines were broken up, and employer and vigilante violence tolerated. State governors reinforced this bias by a willingness to send in the National Guard, ostensibly to maintain law and order, in practice to protect scabs, keep plants open, and break strikes. The federal government had similarly used troops and sought crippling anti-union injunctions in a number of major disputes. What protection the federal government did offer organised labour was either temporary (under the National War Labor Board in World War I) or in railroads (where a clear constitutional mandate existed) or under the Norris–La Guardia Act of 1932 (which outlawed the injunctions that upheld 'yellow dog' contracts), which was not declared constitutional until 1938.