Reforms and Social Changes | Work | Rights of workers and trade unions

"The realm of liberty begins only where work that is determined by need ceases." Karl Marx

Throughout the 19th century, European workers fought relentlessly for improved working conditions including rest days, shorter working hours and no child labour. As a result, trade unions were set up all over Europe to defend these rights, using various methods, from destroying tools (for example, in England), strikes, and dialogue with owners and government (for example, in Germany). Strikes were sometimes broken by force. International Workers Day commemorates such violent confrontations. European governments gradually accepted the presence of trade unions, with certain reservations. In France, trade unions were authorised by the Waldeck-Rousseau law (1884), although civil servants were excluded. In British and French colonies and protectorates, trade unions were only legally authorised after World War I. French predominance, for example, prevented Tunisia from applying the 1884 legislation.

Working Number:	FR 096
Name:	"Workers' pensions"
Holding Museum:	National Library of France
Date:	1906
Materials:	-
Curator Justification:	Workers were barely protected from the hazards of everyday life in the 19th century. They had to rely on their families in old age or if they fell ill. In Europe, workers began to organise, creating mutual assistance societies and demanding that the state and employers consider welfare provisions such as health insurance and pensions. Pensions became a key electoral issue.

Working Number:	IT1 041
Name:	Letter by the Prefect of Cosenza (Calabria, Italy) to the Ministry of Agriculture, Industry and Trade, referring to the exceedingly long working hours of women and children in the spinning factories
Holding Museum:	
Date:	State Archives of Cosenza
Materials:	Cosenza, 4 January 1896
Curator Justification:	-
	In the second half of the 19th century, trade unions, philanthropists and doctors denounced the perils of long working hours for women and children in Europe. Legislation was gradually put in place.

Working Number:	UK 147
Name:	Labour certificate No.1(a) [Child's labour certificate]
Holding Museum:	Victoria and Albert Museum
Date:	Dated 1914
Materials:	Printed and hand-inscribed paper
Curator Justification:	Education became mandatory in European countries in the late 19th century. From that time, children were not allowed to work before a certain age and unless they were literate.

Working Number:	FR 093
Name:	Théâtre du Châtelet. Germinal
Holding Museum:	National Library of France
Date:	1880
Materials:	-
Curator Justification:	The calling of strikes and the role of trade unions had long been a largely taboo subject in 19th-century European literature. In France, Emile Zola broke this taboo by writing about a miners' strike in Germinal (1885). This novel was a great success and was also adapted for the stage.

Working Number:	FR 094
Name:	5 May 1919, bank employees on strike [at the trade unions building, Rue de la Grange-aux-Belles, 10e arrondissement, Paris.
Holding Museum:	National Library of France
Date:	1919
Materials:	-
Curator Justification:	Many strikes broke out after World War I, including in traditionally unaffected sectors, to protest against inadequate pay.

Working Number:	FR 095
Name:	Strike fund
Holding Museum:	National Library of France
Date:	1901
Materials:	-
Curator Justification:	If they went on for a long time, strikes became difficult for those no longer receiving any pay. Systems of solidarity such as strike funds were set up, paid into by the strikers themselves and by external supporters.

Working Number:	IT1 031
Name:	Flag of the Italian Socialist Party's local branch in a small village near Turin (Cafasse Torinese), bearing the image of a worker breaking a sword (an icon of antimilitarism)
Holding Museum:	Central State Archives of Italy
Date:	1920
Materials:	-
Curator Justification:	Trade unions most commonly had a political affiliation. This trade union is supporting socialism and antimilitarism.

Working Number:	IT1 032
Name:	Flag of a workers' league bearing the sign
Holding Museum:	Central State Archives of Italy
Date:	Unknown (probably immediately after World War I)
Materials:	-
Curator Justification:	In the late 19th century, despite different political affiliations, trade unions from the same place would often get together to make it easier to provide local support to their members. Such support included labour exchanges and libraries.

Working Number:	IT1 035
Name:	Flag of the peasants' league of a small village in Tuscany, central Italy
Holding Museum:	Central State Archives of Italy
Date:	Unknown (probably c. 1920)
Materials:	-
Curator Justification:	In Europe, trade unions also became popular in the countryside.

Working Number:	IT1 036
Name:	A strike of rice weeders in northern Italy: the women on strike try to stop a train carrying workers hired by the landowners to replace them
Holding Museum:	State Library of Modern and Contemporary History
Date:	1909
Materials:	-
Curator Justification:	In Europe, women soon began participating in strikes. Owners sometimes tried to break strikes by replacing strikers with non-strikers, which could lead to confrontations.

Working Number:	IT1 060
Name:	The Serious Unemployment Crisis in the Province of Ferrara [central Italy]: Women Preventing the Cavalry from Advancing against the Rioters
Holding Museum:	State Library of Modern and Contemporary History
Date:	4–13 May 1913
Materials:	-
Curator Justification:	In Europe, women soon began participating in strikes. Owners sometimes attempted to break strikes using the army, which could lead to violent confrontations.