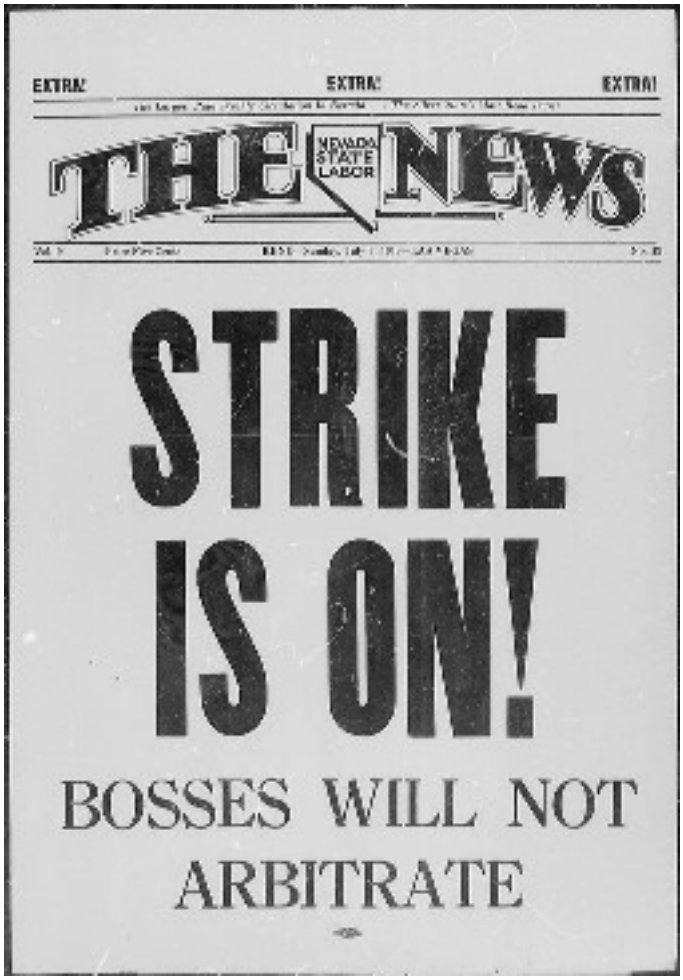
Myth 151: Laboring Under a Misperception
By Guy Rocha, Former Nevada State Archivist

"One of Nevada's mysteries, a decades-old enigma, is why unions have never caught on in the north," according to a recent newspaper column. Actually there is no mystery.

Labor unions did thrive in northern Nevada until the aftermath of the 1952 "Right-to-Work" law. While it is true that it has been decades since organized labor has been a major force in the northern part of the state, the fact remains that from the 1860s until the 1950s union strength was principally in northern Nevada.

Among other labor legislation still in effect, we can thank the Reno trade unions and the Comstock miners' unions for Labor Day becoming an official state holiday in 1903.


EXTRA! EXTRA! EXTRA!

THE NEVADA STATE LABOR NEWS

STRIKE IS ON!

BOSSES WILL NOT ARBITRATE

Unions caught on in northern Nevada with the founding of the Gold Hill Miners' Union in 1866. It was followed by miners' unions being organized in Virginia City in 1867, Silver City in 1873, and then in virtually every mining town throughout Nevada.

The template for miners' unions in the gold, silver and copper mining towns throughout the western United States was the Comstock miners' unions.

Members, or former members, of the Comstock miners' unions were elected Storey County sheriff, district attorney, and district judge. Union miners served in the state legislature and one, William Woodburn, was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives and later served as Attorney-General. A candidate running for a seat in Congress could not afford to ignore the miners' unions in the latter 19th and early 20th-century.

Beginning in 1902, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) conducted an extensive organizational drive in northern Nevada centered in Reno. Virtually every trade was unionized in Reno, Sparks, Carson City and Virginia City, amounting to dozens of locals.

In conjunction with the railroad brotherhoods and the miners' unions, the trade unions had a powerful lobby in the state legislature.

Governor John Sparks was first elected in 1902 as a friend of labor.

Patrick McCarran, with his election to the legislature in 1902, and throughout his career as a U.S. Senator, enjoyed the support of the AFL.

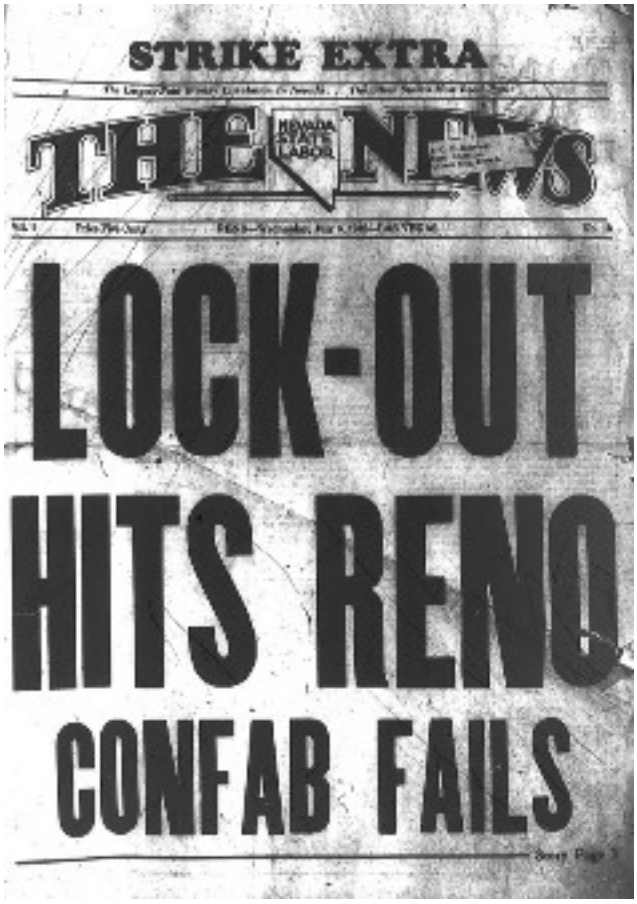
Labor Day was officially celebrated on a rotating basis between Reno, Sparks, Carson City and Virginia City until World War I.

As in the rest of the country during the Harding, Coolidge and Hoover presidencies, organized labor did not fare well in Nevada in the 1920s. At the same time, with the decline of precious metal mining in the Silver State, the Comstock miners' unions, and other miners' unions throughout the state, folded.

The New Deal Era under President Franklin Roosevelt reinvigorated the union movement. Trade unions prospered in Nevada in the 1930s, particularly in Las Vegas during and after the construction of nearby Hoover Dam.

Reno and Sparks' unions flourished, too.

By the late 1940s, organized labor was flexing its muscle in Nevada's two largest cities.


STRIKE EXTRA

THE NEWS

NEVADA STATE LABOR

LOCK-OUT HITS RENO

CONFAB FAILS

In 1949 after contract renewal talks broke down, a culinary union strike was called on July 3 for the July 4th weekend, which, because it was combined with the Reno rodeo, was the town's big tourism event of the year. The strike and the short notice enraged business leaders, especially casino owners, who were successful in portraying themselves as victims by locking out their employees and inviting all tourists to a public park for low priced or free picnics where employers themselves were food and drink servers. The event shifted public sentiment sharply against unionism in northern Nevada. The employers used that shift to get a "Right-to-Work" law passed by voters in 1952.

Essentially the new law invoked section 14b of the 1947 federal Taft-Hartley-Act prohibiting labor unions from compelling workers to join a union post-employment (the union shop). Efforts by organized labor to repeal the state law using the initiative process and in the legislature failed over the years

Today, Nevada is among 22 states with "Right-to-Work" laws.

While most trade unions have managed to survive in northern Nevada since the advent of the "Right-to-Work" law, the culinary local is only a shadow of its former self. In the end, southern Nevada has emerged as a union stronghold and northern Nevada, where unions were once prominent and powerful, appears to the newcomer as a place where "unions have never caught on."

Photo credits: Top: headline from the *Nevada State Labor News* of July 3, 1949 when the Culinary Union went on strike in Reno.

Bottom: Headline from the *Nevada State Labor News* of July 6, 1949 announcing that striking union members had been locked out of their jobs by Reno hotels and casinos.

The Historical Myths of the Month are published in the Reno *Gazette-Journal*; the *Sierra Sage*, Carson City/Carson Valley;
Humboldt Sun
;
Battle Mountain Bugle
;
Lovelock Review-Miner
, and
Nevada Observer
(online version).