American trade unionism was born shortly after the Revolutionary War, when, in 1786, Philadelphia printers struck for the one dollar a day wage. But American women were not welcomed with open arms by unions, which saw them as economic competition. Although women who worked in 1833 were estimated to earn only a quarter of what male workers made, they still were excluded from all national unions. In its 1866 convention, the National Labor Union, a short-lived federation of national unions, started the effort to break down these barriers by resolving, “We pledge our individual and undivided support to the sewing women and daughters of toil in this land . . . .” The following year, the Cigarmakers Union made history by becoming the first national union to allow women to become members on an equal basis with men. Still unable to get into most male-led unions, women workers formed their own, such as the Collarmakers and Laundry Workers Union, and the Daughters of St. Crispin, a union among shoemakers.

In the 1880s, women, who comprised 17 percent of the workforce, gained some acceptance in the Knights of Labor. when the Knights of Labor disintegrated, women tried to become part of the American Federation of Labor, but were not encouraged. Many of the early organized AFL craft unions still are reluctant to let women in, as is illustrated by Angela Summer’s lawsuit to join the Plumbers Union. Even though not totally welcome, women workers persevered. The radical Industrial Workers of the World, or Wobblies, which was founded
in 1905, aggressively organized women as well as male workers. In 1909, women led "The Revolt of the Twenty Thousand," the famous New York garment workers strike.

Today women are still not equally represented in unions. While three out of every ten American men are union members, the rate for women is one out of every seven. Women continue to be a rarity in the higher levels of union leadership even in unions with a majority female membership. The Coalition of Labor Union Women, a national organization of women unionists from all different major unions, is seeking to change this situation. One significant step forward was the AFL-CIO's decision to endorse the equal rights amendment. But as many women union members will tell you, endorsing the ERA is only the first step. Equally important is getting states passing the ERA to extend protective legislation to male workers. In Washington state this never happened and, instead, all protective legislation was removed. As a result, lunch breaks, weight limits, ventilation requirements, and costs in bathrooms were eliminated; in other words, the actual working conditions of women factory workers declined.

The stories in this section illustrate that unions can either be a force for justice on the job or a stumbling block. Barbara Shaman has had to fight her union as much as her employer. Jo Ann Johnson's union work fills her need for a greater challenge than her boring job provides. Laura Sarvis' and Linda Lanham's stories provide a remarkable contrast between a woman trying to survive and organize a shop, and a more polished union professional battling both the company and male hostility within her union.