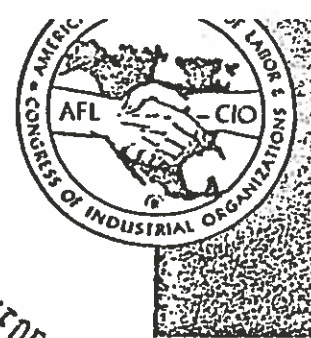


# HUMAN RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE

AMERICAN FEDERATION OF LABOR AND CONGRESS OF INDUSTRIAL ORGANIZATIONS  
1315 WALNUT STREET, ROOM 1428, PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA 19107 (215) 735-4239

**BEN STAHL**  
Regional Director



REMARKS  
110th ANIVERSARY OF THE DEATH OF  
WILLIAM H. SYLVIS

Fernwood Cemetery, Philadelphia, PA  
July 27, 1979

Ben Stahl  
Regional Director, HRDI AFL-CIO

Board of Trustees

GEORGE MEANY  
Chairman of the Board

MAX GREENBERG  
GEORGE HARDY  
PAUL JENNINGS  
JOSEPH D. KEENAN  
LANE KIRKLAND  
JOHN H. LYONS  
I. LOYD McBRIDE  
P. L. SIEMILLER  
MARTIN WARD  
GLENN E. WATTS  
HUNTER P. WHARTON

Officers

ALAN KISTLER  
President  
HAROLD H. JACK  
Secretary-Treasurer  
CHARLES E. BRADFORD  
Executive Director

Since our gathering exactly ten years ago on July 27, 1969, here at this monument, I have returned to Fernwood Cemetery three times. Each time, I have visited this grave of William H. Sylvis, the founder of our nation's modern labor movement. Four years ago the United Farm Workers of America, one of the newest national unions, marched through Philadelphia visiting historical spots of interest to the labor movement. A feature of that march which began at Independence Square was a ceremony at this monument, appropriately engraved "Labor's Champion." More recently, I came here for the funeral of my sister and again for the dedication of her tombstone.

William H. Sylvis was a young man of 42 when he died, 110 years ago today. Yet in the few years of his adult life, he left for future generations of trade unionists, the framework of today's labor movement. For Sylvis was an innovator, an initiator of new organizational and programmatic concepts that make organized labor the major force for progressive social change in America.

Philadelphia is not only the birthplace of our nation - the home of the Declaration of Independence and the

Constitution - but, primarily due to William H. Sylvis, the birth-place also of our modern trade union movement. Sylvis, working out of Philadelphia, out of the offices of Local #1 Molders Union - still chartered here - gave us the concepts, the ideas and the actual beginnings of our movement, including the following:

- a national union of workers in the same industry
- a central labor council, the gathering of local unions in a city
- a national federation of national unions
- a labor movement with international labor ties
- a blending of "bread and butter" and "social unionism"
- equality on the job - for blacks and whites, for men and women

As we study William Sylvis' activities and methods of operation in solving the problems facing workers in his day, we wonder how he would act on the problems facing the American unionists locally and nationally today. How would he react to the Energy Crisis? Would not his interest in the consumer needs of the workers place him at the head of the Rally Against Big Oil that Philadelphia trade unionists will hold next Wednesday, August 1st. His number one emphasis was on organizing workers. What would be his bold challenge to the new anti-union offensive in today's labor relations as witnessed at J.P. Stevens, at Tenneco in the Newport News Shipyard and in the slick actions of the new breed of management consultants hired to fight unions in organizing and collective bargaining.

His concern for the unity of all workers, black and white (even during Civil War days), and equality for men and women

would have him concerned about racial tensions in our cities, tensions which affect jobs, housing, education, and, particularly now in Philadelphia, politics. And, as a leader in the fight for Women's Suffrage, Sylvis would be fully supportive of today's women's revolution.

We must learn from the history of the labor movement, from its accomplishments and its defeats. "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

Our commemoration of the 100th anniversary of Sylvis' death just ten years ago took place exactly one week after man's first walk on the moon. Today America is no longer surrounded by an aura of glory and greatness following the astronauts' achievement. Today we are a somber nation, desperately concerned about energy, about higher unemployment and run-away inflation. Yet, it is still possible to apply William Sylvis' principles to today's setting, and I should like to repeat now some of my comments on what I consider his eight major contributions.

1. Sylvis conceived of a labor movement composed of national labor unions. He helped convene and presided over the first convention of the National Labor Union in February, 1861. As its president, he developed the concepts that formed the basis of the present federation of national unions, the AFL-CIO.

In addition, Sylvis played a leading part in the first national convention of the Molders' Union, assembled July 5, 1859, here in Philadelphia with 35 delegates representing 12 local unions. Thus, the Molders' Union, as a national union, is today 120 years old. Sylvis was elected its first Treasurer

and later became its President. As he stated, "In union there is strength and in the formation of a national organization embracing every molder in the country, a union founded upon a basis broad as the land in which we live, lies our only hope."

2. Sylvis formed a local trades council in Philadelphia - the predecessor of the Philadelphia AFL-CIO Council - bringing together for the first time the workers of the various local crafts and industries to act together on common local community problems.

3. The slogan of "organizing the unorganized" dates back to the man we remember today, a man who traveled throughout the land for his Molders' national union - even in the deep South immediately after the Civil War - building his union so that it became the first national union where a majority of the workers in the industry were at one time organized. The union, Sylvis said, "knows no North, no South - no East, no West - neither color nor sex."

4. The three forces of the European labor movement were combined by Sylvis in the structure and function of his Union - the trade union, the cooperative and the political organization. For Sylvis did not limit his horizon to the bread and butter trade union issues. He developed cooperative societies to meet the needs of his members as consumers and to attempt some control over the ruthless lords of industry in the post-Civil War depression years.

5. He constantly involved himself in the political issues of the day, no matter how controversial they appeared. He attempted to stave off the approaching Civil War through proposals

to Congress; he supported political candidates (he, himself, was considered as a candidate for Vice President in the election of 1868); he was involved in the Greenback issue - an issue relating to currency, inflation and fiscal policies.

6. In 1868, Sylvis was the first to propose the establishment of a Secretary of Labor as a cabinet post - a proposal that was not fulfilled until 50 years later.

7. Sylvis was one of the first union leaders to comprehend the concept of civil rights and the need for the unity of all workers. He pointed out that employers attempted to divide workers on the basis of religion and national origin. White trade unionists and black trade unionists must, today, follow Sylvis' precept and accept each other as equals and build a society based upon equality. We must end both white and black separatism so that we can solve the problems of poverty, education, housing, health and full employment, together. This certainly would be the message William H. Sylvis would have for us today.

8. The first American labor leader to establish ties with the labor movement in Europe, William Sylvis wrote to the International Workingmen's Association, "Our cause is a common one. It is the war between poverty and wealth. This monied power is fast eating up the substance of the people. We have made war upon it and we mean to win it." This was the beginning of American labor's concern with workers throughout the world.

It is that kind of concern that makes William Sylvis, dead 110 years, still live for the American labor movement. We

congratulate the International Molders and Allied Workers' Union, AFL-CIO, for keeping alive the memory of William H. Sylvis.

The Molders Union - the oldest of our national unions - 120 years old this month - has kept labor history a current living subject even as it mourns its dead. It is a union that has full rank and file participation in its decision-making processes. Though not one of the giant unions of our times, it, nevertheless, has a great impact on the urban communities around the nation where its members live - for they are involved in the community, social, and political life of these communities in the tradition of their founder, William Sylvis, the pioneer whose devotion and idealism are today, more than ever, needed in the labor movement. Let us preserve and extend his sense of social responsibility by retaining democratic and active trade unions, to meet the problems of our own time and generation. This is the tribute deserved by the man who said, "I love this union cause" and proved it.