John L. Lewis (1880-1969) is considered one of the most powerful, active, effective and controversial leaders in American labor organization's history. He was the president of the United Mine Workers of America (UMW) for forty years between 1920 and 1960, and one of the founders of the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO) in the mid-1930s. Some admire him as a labor leader and a talented public speaker, while others regard him an opportunist and a demagogue. He was often accused of using dictatorial power in running the UMW, but for the miners he was a hero, a defender and a spokesman. Whatever his faults were, Lewis was a colorful unionist, who fought vigorously for workers’ right to organize, shorter working hours and improved benefits and safety for miners. Founder of the UMW Welfare and Retirement Fund designed to improve conditions in mines and to help the sick and the aged, he received the Freedom Medal from President Lyndon Johnson in 1964.

Born in Iowa to a Welsh immigrant coal-miner, he entered the mines and then became a trade unionist. In 1911, Lewis was appointed as a special organizer for the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and retained this position for six years. A talented public speaker, Lewis was elected vice-president of the UMW before becoming president in 1920. By then, the coal industry had grown dramatically and the UMW, with 400,000 members and union contracts, was the nation's largest trade union. Lewis and his union appeared very successful and had more influence in politics than ever before. However, the 1920s were years of depression in the soft coal industry, both in terms of production and in terms of labor force. The economy-wide depression that started in 1929 made things even worse, and from 1929 until 1932, the UMW couldn't effectively protect its members. Between 1920 and 1932, membership had fallen to 150,000 and life worsened for soft-coal miners as hourly earnings had declined to 50
cents. Lewis supported Franklin D. Roosevelt for the presidency (both in 1933 and 1936) and welcomed the New Deal, claiming that only federal intervention could revive the soft-coal industry. Under Roosevelt and with the lobbying of Lewis, section 7a of the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), which secured the right of workers to organize unions, was passed in 1933. A year later, miners, led by Lewis, were guaranteed a 7-hour day, five days a week. Also, they were given higher daily wages, with a minimum wage of $5 in the northern districts and $4.60 in the south, and child labor was outlawed. Desiring to organize the millions of mass-production workers, Lewis set up the CIO in 1935, first as a bloc inside the AFL and later as an independent union. CIO's success in organizing workers in the auto and steel industries in 1937 led to an increase in membership by nearly 100%, making it an influential force in politics and economics and a union bigger than the AFL. Lewis stopped supporting Roosevelt in the election of 1940 and even resigned as president of the CIO when Roosevelt was reelected, since he thought that the US should not intervene in the European conflict. In the next decade, Lewis led a series of strikes, demanding wage increases and mine safety. The strikes during the war period resulted in public hostility towards Lewis, who was often accused of damaging the nation's war effort, and he became very unpopular. In 1947, an explosion in Centralia, Illinois, killed 111 miners and the union went on strike for six days as a response. Speaking before Congress, Lewis blamed its members for the tragedy and defended the coal miners' strike. Failing to comply to a court order to resume negotiations with mine operators in 1948 resulted in a $1,500,000 fine on the UMW and a $20,000 fine on Lewis personally. Despite these setbacks, the late 1940s were also rewarding for Lewis and brought one of his greatest achievements - the establishment of the Welfare and Retirement Fund. The fund was designed to help the sick and the aged and to
improve working conditions for miners. By 1956, a medical and hospitalization program had enabled more than half a million patients to receive proper treatment. Programs such as rehabilitation aid cash benefits and aid to widows allowed more than 75,000 retired miners to receive pensions and tens of thousands widows and orphans to get aid. In January of 1960, Lewis retired as president of the UMW, but remained the chairman of the Welfare and Retirement Fund until his death.

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