

A brief history of the Union at Y-12

Ralan Wardlaw served as an intern at the Y-12 National Security Complex during the summer of 2014. He is a senior at South Carolina State University majoring in Journalism. He researched and wrote the following story.

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Since 1943, Y-12 has been a staple in strengthening national security in the United States and protecting the country from a global threat of weapons of mass destruction. Dating back over 70 years, Y-12 has employed thousands of Americans of all ages and beginning in 1951, the employees chose to have representation to discuss the issues and requests of everyday workers.

The first labor union at Y-12 was voted into existence after three days of voting on February 13, 14, and 15 of 1951. The Atomic Trades and Labor Council (ATLC) at Y-12 was organized four and a half years after the Oak Ridge National Laboratory established their union on September 25, 1946.

There are currently 14 unions within Y-12. The purposes of the unions are to represent all of its members for benefits, make contracts successful, and make sure strikes do not happen. The ATLC has only been through seven strikes in the 73 years of existence at Y-12, with the most recent and longest strike occurring in June 1987 which lasted 107 days in all.

The strikes that have been carried out by the workers of Y-12 have been for a variety of reasons. Issues ranging from insurance plans for employees to wages for cafeteria workers to scheduling of hours have been some of the things that led to strikes at Y-12.

The labor unions at Y-12 can be seen as a direct correlation to the economy in East Tennessee, primarily because of the good wages earned by workers. When the union fights to have better salaries for the workers at Y-12, a lot of that money enters into the businesses in Oak Ridge and surrounding communities.

When employees have more money they are more likely to go out to eat for lunch in local restaurants or when they purchase goods and services for their family. Current ATLC president, Steve Jones, who has been employed at Y-12 for 39 years, agrees with that economic outlook.

“The wages of Y-12 workers help the entire economy in East Tennessee because we spend our money here,” Jones said.

Money is at the center of almost everything in our world and the unions at Y-12 make sure its employees are properly compensated for their jobs, and they do much more.

Their ability to negotiate with the Department of Energy, who currently has nine different contractors, is also seen as a major benefit for employees. The efforts of union workers have contributed to preventing a workers’ strike for 27 years. ATLC 2nd Vice President, Mike Thompson, who also has over 30 years of service in at Y-12, commented on the overall benefit of labor unions.

“Our ability to negotiate good contracts that help employees with salaries and other benefits is our biggest contribution to Y-12,” Thompson said.

Labor unions within Y-12 are the liaisons that ensure the strong connection between employees and the current company responsible for managing the Y-12 site. Employees at Y-12 have the representation in

place to ensure they will receive all of the benefits they need to take care of themselves and their family while they are employed at the Y-12 National Security Complex in Oak Ridge.

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Ralan expressed his appreciation for the opportunity to delve into the history of the union efforts at Y-12 and for getting the chance to interview these experienced union leaders. I believe experience like this will be valuable to Ralan in his future career in Journalism and also has value to Y-12 as well as the Oak Ridge and East Tennessee community as it helps all to understand and appreciate our work environment.

The joint efforts such as the Labor and Management Prayer Breakfast and other such joint activities also help continue the cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship between labor and management. Our heritage at Y-12 includes a "Can Do" attitude that extends across the board to both labor and management.

Thanks to Ralan for documenting these interviews and to Steve and Mike for sharing their knowledge of the history. The cooperative atmosphere between labor and management has been and continues to be a key strength for Y-12. It is good to see this part of our heritage demonstrated to our interns and others who come to work here.