



HISTORY

Since the late 19th century, Seattle has been known for its strong support of labor movements and worker's rights. The organization of the West Central Labor Union in 1888, strengthened in the early 20th century through the support of numerous other trade unions, led to the largely unsuccessful Seattle General Strike of 1919.

Striking workers at the Skinner and Eddy shipyard at Seattle's Pier 36 in 1919. | Labor Archives of the University of Washington

The following decades saw a decline in the strength of region-wide labor movements, due in part to the poverty thousands of unemployed workers faced during the Great Depression. With nowhere else to go, Seattle workers built a total of eight different slum cities -- branded as "Hooverilles" by their chagrined residents -- to house those struck by a sudden need for shelter.



Seattle SoDo Hooverville, 1937 - Colorized

Despite these hardships, individual unions continued to flourish, and in 1942 a new Labor Temple was built to provide offices for wartime workforce groups to organize new unions, and to sustain older unions as they continued to grow in membership and influence. Post-war economic stagnation and recovery defined Seattle's labor movement through the late 1940's and early 50's, although many unions, inspired by the construction of the Labor Temple, built their own individual office spaces around the city.



American Federation of Labor Temple, Seattle, March 1955 - Photo by Werner Lenggenhager

The development of Belltown's real estate became a topic of regional debate in the 1960's, and gained popularity with both the construction of Interstate 5 and Seattle's hosting of the 1962 World's Fair. The majority of the city's business leaders and politicians were united behind one change in particular: the razing of Pike's Place Market, in its place to build high-rise towers, parking garages, and more office spaces. Outraged Seattleites rejected this proposal for years, eventually sealing its fate by certifying Pike's Place Market as a historical site in 1971. But the desire of property owners to turn their Belltown real estate from industrial workspaces into more profitable holdings never diminished.



Puget Sound Labor Agency, AFL-CIO
Serving The Community Since 1975

The Puget Sound Labor Agency food bank was originally formed by James K. Bender, then-Executive Secretary Treasurer of the King County Labor Council, to provide food for union members still hurt financially by the Arab Oil Embargo of 1973-1974. Retaliating against America's re-supply of Israeli soldiers fighting in the Arab-Israeli War, members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) froze shipments of oil to the United States. According to the U.S. State Department, "The price of oil per barrel first doubled, then quadrupled, imposing skyrocketing costs on consumers and structural challenges to the stability of whole national economies." America's over-dependence on foreign oil had proved to be unsustainable. The American workers felt the brunt of the embargo's economic impact, finding themselves continually paying large expenses with w



oak dollars as domestic oil supply dried up.

A Well-Stocked Pantry; 1971

Food banks and pantries were a new concept around this time. St. Mary's Food Bank in Phoenix, Arizona was the first; founded in 1967 by retired businessman John van Hengel, the food bank collected edible, slightly-damaged goods destined for disposal from local grocery stores - dented cans, stale bread, bruised produce - to redistribute it to those in need. In the 70's, he received a federal grant to start America's Second Harvest -- known today as Feeding America -- a non-profit organization which, in its first years, helped to develop food banks in city neighborhoods around the country. Whether PSLA was founded with help from van Hengel or not is unclear, but regardless, the Puget Sound Labor Agency's formation in 1975 makes it one of the longest-operating food banks in the nation.

Once the economic uncertainties of the 1970's had passed, PSLA began giving food to any member of the community who needed it -- and that number grew and grew. The 80's and 90's saw Seattle change its zoning laws in Belltown, allowing for the construction of high-rise apartment buildings which priced many low-income tenants out of their homes. In recent years, Amazon's purchase of several corporate office buildings in South Lake Union has exacerbated this housing inequality, since high-paid Amazon tech workers are able to easily walk or bus to

work from their Belltown apartments. For those Belltown residents left behind by this slow yet steady gentrification while they struggle to make ends meet, food security and community has never been more important.



For 46 years, the food bank has been a community hub for some of Belltown's longest-tenured residents. To continue supporting our union members, PSLA offers emergency assistance for members struggling to pay bills like mortgage/rent costs, phone bills, and utilities. Since 1975, we have also built wheelchair ramps for local disabled residents as a way to give back even more to our community. But beyond that, PSLA is a place where people can be their true selves and live life with each other. We celebrate holidays together, and we have mourned each other's losses. When you come through our food bank, we want you to leave with more than just high-quality food; with that, you will leave with a smile on your face, an encouraging sense of community, and a motivation to spread the love!

