LABOR UNION MEMBERSHIP
Changes Over Time, Prospects for the Future

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)

by

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Introduction

Labor has played a powerful role in helping to raise the standard of living for wage earners in the United States. The U.S. has some of the highest paid industrial workers in the world. Yet, organized labor has had to face a long hard battle to win recognition of their rights.

Now, times are changing. Labor has to face new battles: a declining membership, job displacement because of new technology, and industry wide strikes which can cripple a nation as management and labor fight their private wars. Workers are taking a second look at unions and are trying to decide if they are worth what they have to pay for them.

Reasons for membership in a union are changing--no longer is the union's demand for a good wage enough to keep workers' loyalty; today's worker has come to expect more.

Problems such as these have caused a drastic change in union membership. What was once 35 percent of the labor force, has now dwindled down to just above 20 percent. Forecasts for the future show an even more discouraging trend. So the questions remain, what are the reasons behind this loss of membership, and is there any hope for the future. Economists and labor leaders have been trying to figure this out, and what they believe is in store for unions will be discussed here.

A brief look at early unions and their struggles may give some insight as to why today, there is a decline in organized labor. For is it just a decline--or the fall of big labor.
Early Labor Membership

The beginnings of the American labor movement almost parallels the birth of the nation. The first successful concerted collective action to win a wage increase was by the New York journeyman printers in 1778. However, the growth of unions in the United States did not keep pace with the growth of the country during most of the following 200 years. The unions faced major impediments such as legal decisions, large numbers of unskilled immigrants willing to work at low wages, and the predominately rural nature of 19th century America. Yet even in the face of these problems, collective activity still occurred. Most of the activity was among skilled workers, but eventually unskilled workers became involved.

The Knights of Labor was organized in Philadelphia in 1869. Although its goals and membership were different from those unions that ultimately became a part of the U.S. labor movement, they were one of the first major organizations. During the beginning of the 1880's, the country entered a depression, and the organization grew. In a number of railroad strikes, the Knight's successfully organized workers and won their demands. The nationally publicized negotiations with strikers of the Wabash Railroad added strength to the organization. By the middle of 1886, the membership of the Knights of Labor had reached 700,000.

The executives of the Knights were long-run oriented, not wanting to deal with day-to-day grievances. This attitude, along with public pressure and the inability to get employers to arbitrate, eventually led to the decline of the Knight's membership. By 1893, the membership was down to 75,000. But this decline in the Knights of Labor did not bring
an end to national organizations. "For at the height of the Knights of Labor's success, the first enduring national federation was formed."³

The American Federation of Labor (AFL) was created in 1886 at a meeting of national unions.⁴ It was started because of the frustration craft union members felt about the mixing of skilled and unskilled workers in the Knights of Labor. The AFL was formed by unions of skilled employees, and during most of the rest of its history, it maintained a skilled-workers orientation. The direction of the AFL was pragmatic, not ideological as the Knight's had been. The AFL was concerned with day-to-day, not ultimate ends. As Samuel Gompers, long time president of the AFL, said when asked what labor's goals were, simply: "More, more, more."

As the years went on, labor continued to struggle against a hostile national environment. During the last three decades of the 19th century and first decade of the 20th century, the United States experienced some of the bitterest labor struggles in its history. The era was characterized by frequent financial panics which resulted in depressions, owners who refused to recognize or negotiate with unions, and the willingness of government to intervene on the side of the employers.

With the 1920's came a decade of relative prosperity and freedom from economic panics, but it was also a decade of transition. Henry Ford had introduced the assembly line, creating an industrial rather than a craft orientation. While the AFL was still taking a strong stand against industrial organization, others realized the importance of organizing unskilled workers. By the middle 1930's, leaders of the United Mine Workers, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, the International Ladies' Garment Workers, and many others formed the Congress for Industrial
Major efforts were begun to organize workers in basic industries such as steel, textiles, rubber and autos.

The Steel Workers Organizing Committee, and the United Automobile Workers sought recognition and bargaining with such major companies as U.S. Steel and General Motors. By the end of 1937, the CIO membership was 3,700,000 strong.\(^5\)

This organization of labor was not an overnight success, but by the 1930’s even the public policy toward unions had begun to shift. Legislation, such as the Norris-LaGuardia Act passed in 1932, and the Wagner Act passed in 1935, helped strengthen the unions by guaranteeing them the right to organize, bargain collectively, and strike for any purpose.

The 1940’s brought many problems for labor. There were more than 4,300 strikes in 1941 involving more than eight percent of the work force. Coal miner problems were prevalent during World War II, and labor difficulties intensified in 1946. This caused not only a change in the public’s opinion of unions, but it also caused membership to fluctuate from around 28 percent of the workforce in 1937, down to 26 percent in 1943, up to an all time high of 35 percent around 1945.

Union membership has never again reached the height that it did at its peak after World War II. It came close in 1955, when the AFL and CIO merged. However, this new union did not become a more powerful movement. In terms of union penetration it reached its peak in 1956, with about 33 percent of the workforce unionized. But by 1964, it had fallen to below 29 percent, and a decline of 700,000 members was recorded.\(^7\)
The Recent Decline of Organized Labor

The following chart shows union membership since 1930. Its peak was recorded just after World War II. Its decline, soon after the merger of the AFL-CIO, is apparent.

Percent of union membership in the work force

(Source: Newsweek/September 5, 1983)
The following bar graph shows the ever increasing numbers of workers who do not belong to labor unions. Non-union workers are grabbing a wide array of jobs that used to go to union members.

Share of Workers Who Do Not Belong to Labor Unions

1965 71.6%
1970 72.7%
1975 74.5%
1980 78.1%

Reasons for Loss of Membership

It is apparent from any data source that union membership is declining. What are the reasons behind this loss of membership? This is a question many labor leaders are asking themselves. Some believe it is management's new tactics to rid itself of unions; others feel it is advanced technology displacing too many workers; and still others believe it is the unions themselves, and their inability to relate to the new breed of worker. It could be one of these, all of these, or a host of others. But the fact remains that something needs to be done.

One primary cause of this decline is the increasingly effective management opposition to unions. "In 1980 some 15,000 workers were held by the National Labor Relations Board to have been fired for union activities...company managers have been fighting the unions. They are breaking the law, and there's no real penalty for breaking the law."8

According to Richard Freeman, professor of economics at Harvard, studies show that approximately 60 percent of the union decline occurred because of changes in the kind of workers and the kind of occupations. "But some recent losses have occurred among blue-collar workers in the North, in the traditional union heartland. In both the new and old areas today, what matters is not just what workers want, but also what management wants."9

Management has become more aggressive and confident. "Union busting has become a growing speciality for consultants, and faced with tough competition, many companies let fair labor practices go by the boards. They fire and discharge workers for organizing activity much more now."10

Along with these tactics, many companies are using other ways for ridding themselves of unions. Instead of firing or intimidation, or, like in the old days--hiring a few Pinkertons to come down to the factory
gate and rustle a few workers-- they simply hire a moving company to pack up the whole operation and ship it to another town. Both industry and population centers are drifting from the Northeast to the South and West-- areas that have always been hostile to labor. "So effective is this new exodus strategy that it has succeeded in virtually decimating the membership roles of entire unions and has seriously weakened the union movement itself within the span of just two decades." 11

Just over 60 percent of all trade union membership is concentrated in sixteen northeast and midwest states. Between 1960 and 1975, in the New England states, manufacturing employment declined by 9.9 percent, and in the midwest states by 13.7 percent. While employment in the nation as a whole was growing by 8.3 percent, manufacturing jobs in the Great Lakes states increased only 3.2 percent. Translated into the number of jobs, in less than seven years, New York City lost 647,000 jobs. Philadelphia, in less than five years, lost nearly one-fourth of all its factory jobs. 12

This drift to areas that have always been hostile to labor is causing major organization problems. For example, in February of 1982, the AFL-CIO announced plans for a major organization drive in Houston. But only 8,000 workers signed up, at a time when recession and the oil glut had reduced statewide membership by 25,000. 13

What all of these numbers mean in the long-run is, whether the companies relocate in North Carolina or Hong Kong, they all have one thing in common-- an absence of card carrying union members.

Another tactic that big, non-union companies are using is the setting up of procedures just like unions. When companies that had
defeated union organizing drives were asked if they had made any changes in order to immunize themselves against another union drive, more than two-thirds said they had made significant changes. They had increased wages, improved fringe benefits, set up new personnel practices for more communication and, installed grievance systems.

These grievance systems are a key factor. When ten non-union companies were asked why they installed grievance systems, every single one said it was because of a threat of unionization.14

Professor Fred K. Foulkes of the Boston University School of Management, who has studied the personnel policies of 26 large non-union companies, concluded that these companies were in many ways offering blue-collar workers the best of both worlds. "In dealing with pay and benefit issues, and also in setting the rules by which plants were run, many of the companies were to a remarkable degree limiting the freedom of their managers beyond anything that a union would be able to negotiate."15 Foulkes observed that the employees at these plants with grievance procedures had an attitude of good faith with management. There was an avoidance of the we-they adversary relationship that frequently characterizes the union-management relationship.16

Management has found a way to combat the unions. The threat that workers might unionize has forced many companies to develop more aggressive personnel policies. The end result is, workers enjoy the benefits of unionization without paying the dues.

Unions have to face management and their tactics against them. But something they may not be able to work against is technology.

Advanced technology has displaced many workers through the use
of machines and robots. One robot can often times replace scores of workers, and the problem with robots is they don't join unions.

"Most workers don't mind technology designed to make work easier or better," says David Cohen, field organizer for Western Massachusetts. "What they mind is technology that's specifically designed to replace them." But this is exactly the idea behind robots. "Robotic technology is specifically aimed at reducing the use of physical labor, and it really has no purpose besides that."

It is possible that by the year 2000 robots could replace 15 percent of the manufacturing workforce, forcing some three million people to look for jobs. This is a major threat to future union membership, and it has already taken its toll on the present membership. For if the workers don't have jobs, they are not going to want to join a union.

To find another major reason for the decline in their ranks, unions need look no further than themselves. A look at the statistics shows some of the problems.

In 1945, 35.5 percent of all workers in nonagricultural jobs were members of labor unions. Today less than 25 percent of the labor force carries union cards. Twenty years ago, union representation was voted for twice as often as voting to keep unions out. Now, 52 percent of all elections for organized labor is lost. Even where unions already represent workers, the number of elections to withdraw union representation has increased three-fold in the past ten years.

What is happening here must have something to do with the organization itself. When unions begin to lose the workers they already represent, they must realize that things are changing. Many feel that what big labor seems to lack is a sense of excitement, of purpose,
of indignation. "The great prophets of social reform and economic justice that inspired millions of working Americans to stand up and be counted in the early days of the labor struggle are now gone." 20

To a large extent, major unions are becoming victims of their earlier successes. According to Martin Bailey, a labor specialist with the Brookings Institution, "When you have unemployment compensation, and health insurance, and job-safety legislation and government guaranteed pensions, you can fight for improvements. But you can't have the flag waving experience of fighting for the principle of the thing ever again." 21

Another problem within the union itself is the loss of crusading zeal from its leadership. Many workers are not very responsive to the union coming to where they work, and the union leader may not want to deal with this. According to George Brooks, professor of Labor and Industrial Relations at Cornell, "The typical union leader hates to organize. First, it's a terrible job. Today, the workers insult you, they spit on you, they throw the cards in your face." The union leader would much rather have a cocktail at lunch with management, says Brooks, than be at the factory gates organizing at 6 A.M. 22

Even when they are out at the factory gates there's a fairly good chance that the workers they are trying to organize are already members of other unions. Raiding one another's rank-and-file membership is very commonplace. "I don't think there's any statistic anybody could compile that would give an accurate picture of the time and energy and everything else that's wasted and lost in these jurisdictional fights between unions." 23 The AFL-CIO has no adequate way of dealing with jurisdictional fights, and so internal fighting drains
valuable resources and energy that could be spent on signing up non-
union workers.

Along with the lack of this zeal, unions have had to face up to some painful truths recently. The first is that much of American labor is simply overprivileged. That lesson was learned recently at Interlake, Inc.'s steel plant in Newport, Kentucky. The plant had been losing money for years, and when management's request for a wage freeze was rejected by the United Steelworkers 806-1, Interlake simply closed down the plant. 24

Another lesson of the recession is that many workers may actually be better off without a union. In 1981, 74.9 percent of the cases in which decertification hearings were held voted to oust the union. Only 30.3 percent of certification elections were won that same year. "When times are slow, the union's death grip on wages has put a lot of people out of work." 25 A lot of people would rather work five days a week for a little less, than three days a month for scale. Many workers at non-union plants are finding that although they may make $2 less an hour than unionized employees, the threat of strike or being shut down is not hanging over them.

Probably the major reason unions may be at fault in losing their own members is their inability to face change—the change in the American worker. "When George Meany and his closest friends were in their prime, a 'worker' was narrowly defined as a white male who toiled on an assembly line or built a house, or labored down in the mines." 26 The American workforce has changed dramatically in the past 30 years, and a failure to recognize this change could mean disaster for the unions.

Today, one out of every four workers in the U.S. is under thirty
years of age. Two out of three of these workers have completed high school and nearly one out of seven has a college degree. These workers are smart, and have high expectations. "Nevertheless most are channeled into dead-end jobs that could just as well be performed by a ten-year old."27

Organized labor has been slow to recognize and do something about these problems. The demand for a living wage was enough for the worker of forty years ago who had little education and an empty stomach. However, the worker of today has come to expect a decent wage. Besides this wage, the worker of today, who has been educated for twelve or fourteen years, may want more out of life than just tightening a bolt on a piece of metal as it travels down a conveyor belt.

As a result of labor's non-recognition of this problem, they are not only failing to win new workers, but are having an increasingly difficult time getting the respect of their own younger members.

In order to do something about this, the AFL-CIO recently hired pollster Peter Hart to survey workers on a variety of economic, political and social issues. "We used to think we knew what the rank and file was concerned about," says Badgett of the bricklayers union. "Now we try to find out more systematically."28

This realization that there is a problem is the first step in curing it. However, unless something is done quickly, organized labor will just continue to decline in membership.
Prospects for the Future

With all the problems unions are facing in their declining rank and file, there are still some hopes for the future. New employees such as high-tech workers, and white-collar workers, are potential sources of new members. Unions have been fighting hard to organize these workers who were once regarded as not worth the effort. But unions have found these areas are not as easy to organize as they may have thought, and their battle for new members is seemingly all up hill.

For years the unions have regarded white-collar workers as only marginal sources of new income. Recently however, labor leaders have had to recognize, as the AFL once did about industrial workers, that white-collar workers are the fastest growing segment in society. Between 1970 and 1980, the number of white-collar workers increased by 12.5 million to 50.5 million workers, while blue-collar laborers grew by only 2.7 million, to 30.5 million. According to William Taylor, an official of the Office and Professional Employees International Union, "Everyone sees the future of the trade union movement in white-collar workers." 29

As inflation reduces real incomes and recession erodes job security, office employees are starting to look to unions. The white-collar worker may be beginning to realize that while he is enjoying so-called professionalism, the guy in the warehouse is earning more.

Yet, even though some white-collar workers are looking toward the union, there are just as many who won't join. White-collar workers are not a new occurrence. The American Federation of Teachers is 68
years old, and the Newspaper Guild was founded in 1933. Yet, office workers have always felt they were different. Many identify more with the management team than blue-collar workers, and correspondingly, feel that joining a union would be a step down in status.

Another reason many white-collar workers won't join unions, is because management often gives them the same pay raises that the union won for the production workers in the plant. As long as they can enjoy the benefits without paying union dues--why join.

Another problem labor leaders are finding is that many women have the image that unions are exclusively male dominated. This image is posing a threat to organizing the nation's many clerical and professional women. With the number of clerical workers projected to grow 22 percent, to 22 million by 1990, the unions need to lure these workers into their ranks.

Although by the end of the decade clericals in the work force will exceed the number of workers in unions today, unions have traditionally been reluctant to organize these workers because of their high turnover rate. Many clerical workers don't view their jobs as a real job; many view it as the thing they are doing until they get their break. 30

Many clericals are shying away from unions because of the recession and record unemployment. They feel that their job could be in jeopardy if they joined a union. For example, after a year of trying, the Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU) recently called off its campaign to organize 1,500 Blue Cross/Blue Shield workers in Indianapolis. The OPEIU's director stated, "The economy was just too bad. With their husbands out of work, the women
were happy just to be holding on--if only for $4.50 an hour." 31

"Perhaps the most important problem in organizing white-collar workers is the unwillingness and inability of organized labor to tailor an aggressive organizing strategy suited to the particular needs of this expanding group of workers in the American labor force." 32

Unions must realize that this group of workers is different and therefore must be treated different. They must dispel the myths that they are only for blue-collar workers, or only for males. If they are to be successful they need to show that the union can offer them something management cannot.

There has been some progress in organizing white-collar workers. One of the most commonly cited examples is an organization of female clerical workers known as 9 to 5. Karen Nussbaum, a former clerk-typist at the Harvard Graduate School of Education founded the organization in 1973. Starting with just ten women, the group now has 12,000 members in 18 chapters around the country. Recently, the organization affiliated with the Service Employees International Union, and since then, 9 to 5 has won 12 straight certification elections, and gained an additional 5,000 workers.33

Further gains in membership have been helped by new collective bargaining laws for public workers. Illinois Governor James Thompson signed his state's first collective-bargaining bill for teachers and other employees. According to the new law, school districts and officials on all levels of government must recognize duly authorized unions and bargain on union contracts.

The state of Ohio approved a collective-bargaining law giving teachers, sanitation workers, highway crews and other non-safety
workers a legal right to strike if negotiations reach an impasse. A major fight was won when the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees won the right to represent 30,000 employees of the University of California.

These new laws and recent victories will help win new members, especially in Illinois and Ohio. According to Roger Dahl, director of the labor-management relations service of the U.S. Conference of Mayors, "Prior to the passage of these new laws, employers could just say, 'no, we won't bargain.' These new laws no longer allow the employer to do that." Along with this, many public employees may fear that by staying independent, they will not get the same wage and benefit improvements that the unionized government workers will receive, and so the organization campaigns pick up.

Along with public employees, another new area that is luring union organizers is high tech. Labor leaders are realizing that high tech is where job growth is, and with declining membership trends, high tech is an obvious target.

According to Data Resources Inc., the number of high tech production workers in the U.S. will jump by 22 percent by 1993, to 1.8 million. High tech workers such as engineers, technicians, clerical workers and others, will increase by 32 percent, to 1.4 million.

These new jobs, coupled with incidents such as Honeywell Inc.'s Electro Optics division laying off 100 of its 1,800 employees, and delaying scheduled wage increases, has helped in organizing what is a difficult sector to organize. Other episodes have brought forth many potential union members. In Milpitas, California, Atari Inc. laid off 1,700 employees in order to shift production of home computers
and video games to low-cost plants in Taiwan and Hong Kong. They gave only a one day notice to the first 600 workers laid off.

Another issue that unions are emphasizing to lure high tech workers is pay. About $100,000 was spent on a study showing that Massachusetts workers who produce computers, communications equipment, electronic components, and measuring and controlling devices, earn $0.3c to $1.57 an hour less than the national average for such work. Other issues employees are concerned about is failure to communicate, and safety hazards. One local complained of Atari's refusal to tell them what chemicals they were working with. Others feel that if the company would only say, "We'll talk with you," the union would not have a chance.

Despite such incidents, high tech is still a very difficult sector to organize. Only 5 percent of the 738 high tech companies surveyed by the American Electronics Association said they had any unionized workers. In the past five years there have been 37 bargaining elections, but the unions have won only seven contests. High tech blue-collar workers feel they are different from other blue-collar workers. Companies have strengthened this attitude by hiring "free-spirited people, promoting them quickly and encouraging worker participation at all levels." This attitude that they are different is expressed by a 22 year old assembler, "Silicon Valley just can't become another Detroit. You can't survive here on seniority and zero skills, and that's the way it should be." 35 Most observers agree the unionizing high tech is tough because workers "by and large are satisfied."

However, the unions, facing a declining membership, are not willing to give up very easily. They are learning to adopt more sophisticated tactics. The Communications Workers of America, the International
Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers, the International Union of Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers and the United Auto Workers, are pooling their efforts to go after high tech workers. One union is given the rights to organize a company, but if it has not succeeded after a certain length of time, the rights go to another union.

Another new tactic being used is to contact workers by phone at home, instead of stopping them at plant gates as unions traditionally do. By contacting workers at home, unions can ask them how they feel about working conditions and management, without others around.

Hopefully these new tactics will help organize what may well be one of the last frontiers for unions. What the unions will have to do is show high tech workers that their employers may not always be looking out for their best interest. As Theodore Barrett, the United Auto Worker's regional director for New England says, "The first thing we have to do is demystify high tech, to prove that, contrary to public impression, high tech employers were not present at the Last Supper."
Rising union membership in the service sector is helping to offset labor's dramatic losses in old-line industries.

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(Source: Newsweek/September 5, 1983)
Conclusion

Unions were started because of a need; for without some kind of strong voice to represent them, workers would just be many separate individuals against large companies. "With all their shortcomings, the unions are the only organized voice in America that working people have." 37

Unions need to act less like separate entities, and more like one driving force. They need to stand behind workers as one. The lack of this is helping in the membership decline.

Unions will survive if they can capitalize on the new organizational opportunities. They need to keep trying to organize the white-collar workers and high tech workers. And, they need to realize that their membership is changing and they need to change along with it. Companies are going to be working harder and harder to keep unions out, and so unions have one of the toughest battles ahead of them than they have had in a long time.

If unions are able to meet this challenge, then they will survive. The voice of the worker needs to be represented, and the union is the only thing they have right now.
Footnotes


2 Fossum, p.20.

3 Ibid, p.21.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid, p.36.

6 Ibid, p.38.

7 Ibid, p.50.


9 Ibid, p.100.


12 Ibid.


14 Fortune Panel, p.100.


16 Ibid.


18 Ibid.

19 Rifkin and Barber, p.16.


22 Rifkin and Barber, p.17.

23 Ibid.
26. Rifkin and Barber, p.18.
27. Ibid, p.20.
31. Ibid.
32. Rifkin and Barber, p.20.
37. Rifkin and Barber, p.28.
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"The Rise and Fall of Big Labor." Newsweek, September 15, 1983, pp.50-54.


