



The Challenging Future of the U.S. Labor Movement

SEPTEMBER 2, 2013

Despite soaring profits, American workers claim a shrinking share of the national economic pie. Union decline is a major cause – and if worker fortunes are to improve in the future, the labor movement must reinvent itself and build new alliances. Scholars in an SSN working group led by Nick Carnes and Jake Rosenfeld diagnose the crisis and explore promising approaches.

Union Decline – And Why It Matters

The United States was never at the forefront of organized labor power in the world of advanced industrial democracies. Even so, in the 1950s one in three American wage and salary-earners was a union member – and leading unions wielded considerable influence in setting wage and benefit standards and shaping public policies in Washington DC as well as in many states and city governments in the East, West, and Midwest.

But in recent times, union membership has plummeted to less than ten percent of the workforce – not just because of shifts in the economy, but also under hammer blows from anti-union employers and political attacks on unions and their organizers. Weaker unions mean, in turn, declining economic rewards for all employed Americans, whether or not they are union members. American democracy also suffers, because waning union power leaves fewer popularly rooted groups able to push back against unfettered influence wielded by business, fat cat funders, and ultra-conservative ideological advocates.

Politics, Race, and the Future of the U.S. Labor Movement

Dorian T. Warren, Columbia University and the Roosevelt Institute

As the United States has shifted from a General Motors-style manufacturing economy to a Walmart-style economy featuring the sale of cheap, imported consumer goods, organized labor has remained influential and improved standards for workers of all racial and ethnic backgrounds in Democratic-leaning states in the West, East, and parts of the Midwest. But other regions give full sway to low-wage employers and anti-union political leaders who often try to play on racial and ethnic divisions in the workforce. The future revival of labor influence depends on overcoming regional imbalances and sustaining broad inter-racial alliances.

How the Decline of American Unions Has Boosted Corporate Profits and Reduced Worker Compensation

Tali Kristal, University of Haifa

Even though American workers are steadily more productive, corporate profits are going up at the expense of wages and benefits. If American workers in 2007 had taken home the same 64% share of the national economic pie they did back in 1979, they would have gotten an additional \$600 billion in compensation – more than \$5000 more per worker! Why did this happen? Both the computerization of work and the decline of unions matter, but union decline is the prime culprit. In industries where unions were weak or weakened, employers have been able to deploy new technologies in ways that divide workers and reduce their economic rewards – allowing those employers to grab a growing slice of the economic pie in the form of burgeoning profits.

Why America's Public Sector Unions Face Political Attacks

John S. Ahlquist, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Why have public sector unionized workers faced such fierce political attacks in recent years? A review of trends in many states over several decades shows that unions for public employees flourish only when private-sector unions are relatively strong. As union membership plummets in the private sector, conservatives who want to weaken public employee unions can assume, correctly, that many in the American public now question why government employees should have rights and benefits most others do not enjoy.

Union Decline and Rising U.S. Wage Inequality

Bruce Western, Harvard University, and Jake Rosenfeld, University of Washington

As U.S. unions have gone from being a major influence on the working lives of most ordinary workers to barely hanging on in a few regions and industries, all workers have felt the adverse consequences – because strong unions boosted wages and benefits and reduced wage inequalities for all workers in highly unionized industries and regions, not just their own members. From 1973 to 2007, wage inequality increased by 40% among full-time male workers and by 50% among full-time female workers. For men, the impact of union decline on wage gaps was similar to the impact of the growing wage gap between college and high-school educated workers. Among women, union decline accounts for a fifth of the increase in wage inequality.

How the Decline of Unions Has Increased Racial Inequality

Meredith Kleykamp, University of Maryland, and Jake Rosenfeld, University of Washington

Early U.S. unions were a white man's preserve, but by the 1960s and 1970s union members were increasingly likely to be African American men and women. Over recent decades, however, the steadily growing racial inclusiveness of American unions has coincided with their sharp decline – and the result has been much more economic inequality between different groups of workers than might be true today if unions remained as strong as they once were. Weaker unions exacerbate America's racial divisions and injustices.

Pathways to a Stronger Labor Movement

Leaders in the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations as well as other leading unions realize that the labor movement must innovate and change. Unions cannot do what needs to be done on behalf of American workers without transforming existing organizational practices and building broad new alliances to undertake bold campaigns that go far beyond the traditional focus on negotiating contracts and handling member grievances within particular workplaces.

Can U.S. Unions Learn to Mobilize Workers in New Ways?

John S. Ahlquist, University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Margaret Levi, University of Washington

U.S. unions find themselves in a downward spiral, with membership declining so fast and far that existing unions often cannot afford the cost of new organizing or sustained political efforts. To gain new leverage, existing unions must foster broad alliances to mount campaigns for goals shared by non-union members as well as unionists. Union leaders can inspire members to new efforts, but only if they first reform their own organizations and limit their own perks. And the labor movement as a whole will have to let the most innovative unions take the lead, even if some beleaguered unions cannot manage to change.

What It Takes for Unions to Enlarge Their Mission beyond Servicing Existing Workplace Contracts

Kim Voss, University of California, Berkeley

As the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations debate possibilities for revamping union membership to open participation to people not covered by collective bargaining contracts, it helps to look back at what worked, and did not, back in the 1990s when California unions tried to move away from simply providing services in already unionized workplaces. We studied dozens of attempts to change local unions, most of which fell short. But about a third of union locals did adopt innovative practices – after crises opened the way for new leaders inspired by ideas drawn from broader social movement experiences. The relevant international unions also provided strong support for successful local union efforts to innovate.

Can Workers and Environmentalists Learn to Cooperate?

Erik Loomis, University of Rhode Island

As unions reach out to take part in broader progressive alliances, clashes of organizing styles and perceived interests are bound to present challenges – nowhere more so than in efforts to build bridges between unionized workers and environmental advocates. Historical cases show that differences over issues like jobs and environmental regulations can be very real – but unless new alliances can be forged, big corporations are likely to be the only winners in clashes between workers and environmentalists.

The Growing Commitment to Global Organizing by the U.S. Labor Movement

Peter Evans, University of California, Berkeley, and Brown University

Corporations operate globally, and U.S. unions are learning to cooperate across national boundaries to put joint pressure on corporations that fight unionization efforts in the United States but deal with strong unions abroad. Although international campaigns are challenging, the advantages are illustrated by three recent campaigns involving the Steelworkers, the United Automobile Workers, and the Service Workers International Union.

Finding New Ways to Help Workers

The native-born and immigrant workers who suffer the worst labor conditions are often not members of unions – at least not yet. Unionization remains a vital goal, yet innovative organizational efforts and effective public regulations can also make a difference. However, some fashionable approaches – such as international corporate social auditing campaigns – fall short when workers lack the right to organize and speak on their own behalf.

How Innovative Worker Centers Help America's Most Vulnerable Wage Earners

Janice Fine, Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations

In the absence of new national laws to support labor organizing and help undocumented immigrants become citizens, new kinds of worker centers are supporting services such as English-language instruction and doing public advocacy on their behalf. Worker centers have orchestrated effective campaigns for new laws and regulations, and have initiated lawsuits and regulatory appeals to recoup millions of dollars of wages and benefits improperly withheld from vulnerable low-wage workers. Centers are spreading and expanding their activities so effectively that conservatives opposed to worker rights are mounting attacks against them.

Demanding Fairness on the Job – New Uses for an Old Law

Jessica Garrick, University of New Mexico

The National Labor Relations Act of 1935 is well-known for codifying the rights of many U.S. workers to form unions and engage in collective bargaining. But the same law affords some rights to nonunionized workers as well, and community groups and legal advocates around the country are now making aggressive use of its provisions to fight for workplace protections and improved economic standards. The U.S. Department of Labor is also taking new steps to inform all workers, including those not in unions, of their basic rights and how to ask for redress if they experience abuses.

The Pressing Need to Improve Wages and Benefits for the Workers Who Help Aging Americans Stay at Home

Sandra S. Butler, University of Maine

As unions falter in many declining industries, there are opportunities – and glaring needs – in growing labor force sectors such as home care work. Workers who provide care to disabled or elderly people in their homes do vital jobs they often love, but in most places the hours are erratic and pay and benefits are low. Although these workers are challenging to organize, unions have boosted their pay and improved working conditions in some places, and public regulations could also have an impact. Many home care workers are paid with dollars from the public Medicaid program, and some advocates are calling on the Obama administration to issue an executive order requiring a living wage and basic benefits for them.

How America Can Better Enforce Laws to Protect Workers

Andrew Schrank, University of New Mexico

Under President Obama, the U.S. Department of Labor has become more devoted to carrying through America's existing laws about wages, hours, and workplace safety. But there are some straightforward new steps that could be taken to deploy inspectors more effectively and coordinate their efforts to reduce serious risks to workers that research shows are concentrated in a minority of workplaces with repeated violations.

Why Corporate Social Responsibility Programs are No Substitute for Workers' Rights to Organize

Mark Anner, Pennsylvania State University

Much media and celebrity attention has recently been paid to international "social auditing" efforts meant to inspect employment conditions in plants run by foreign suppliers to corporations that sell highly visible goods to consumers in rich countries. Research shows that such auditing organizations can help make a difference in correcting extremely bad working conditions – but audit organizations influenced by corporations, as most are, tend to downplay violations of workers' rights to form their own organizations, especially in authoritarian countries. Nonprofit professionals, students, and religious and community groups can help workers across the world, but there is no substitute, in the end, for worker rights to organize and speak for themselves.

Encouraging Workers and Union Members to Run for Public Office

Many people understand that unions make a difference in the economy, but fail to notice the ways they can enhance democratic governance – not just by making monetary contributions to candidates willing to support workers' issues and not just by lobbying for legislation or regulations to boost workers' incomes and benefits. In addition, unions encourage and support working-class people and middle-class union members to run for elective offices at the local, state, and national level. This matters, because research shows that people from working-class backgrounds and unionized occupations are more likely – compared to the wealthy white-collar elites who currently predominate in public offices – to push and vote for legislation that speaks to the needs and values of most Americans.

How Government by the Privileged Distorts Economic Policy

Nicholas Carnes, Sanford School, Duke University

Yes, it matters who serves in elected offices. At all levels of U.S. government, office-holders are overwhelmingly from relatively privileged white-collar backgrounds. They are relatively wealthy and only very rarely have ever held blue-collar jobs of the sort the majority of Americans do. Research shows that legislators from different occupational backgrounds raise different economic issues to be addressed by government and vote for different kinds of economic legislation. As a result, the needs and values of business and the wealthy get more attention when government acts, while the economic needs and values of the majority get short shrift. One way to begin to redress this disconnect between elected representatives and those they are supposed to represent is to encourage and support more workers in ordinary jobs to run for elected office.

Unions Foster Middle Class Leadership in American Democracy

Aaron J. Sojourner, University of Minnesota

Occupationally based associations – including labor unions as well as business and professional groups – can encourage their members to run for office and provide them with essential skills and support to win elections. Research on legislators in all fifty U.S. states shows that in states where key occupations like school teaching or law enforcement are more highly unionized, people from those occupations are more likely to be in the legislature. Unions are one of the few kinds of organizations that can open the doors to the exercise of public leadership by non-elite citizens.

The Promise of Union Programs that Recruit and Support Workers to Run for Public Office

Nicholas Carnes, Sanford School, Duke University, and David Broockman, University of California, Berkeley

Left to their own individual devices, men and women from blue-collar and ordinary middle-class occupations rarely run for election to public office, even though many could potentially win and do a good job – and their presence would make American democracy more representative. A few exemplary union programs are beginning to provide the encouragement, training, and financial support necessary to encourage working people to run for office – and win. More efforts along the same lines are needed, and this is not just labor's fight. All Americans who care about responsive democracy have an interest in helping a broader array of candidates compete for elected positions.