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Labor's Weight Beyond Its Numbers

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Labor's Weight Beyond Its Numbers

Abstract
[Excerpt] Beyond numbers, what unions are doing on the ground reflects their vitality. Unions are allying with new grass-roots support groups in creative public advocacy for workers' rights generally, not just for their own members. Unions are also experimenting with new forms of social bargaining, using leverage such as pension fund investments and shareholder resolutions. They do this for their own organizational goals, but also for public goals such as transparent corporate governance and honest corporate accounting.

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Labor's Weight Beyond Its Numbers

Washington Post - Sunday, July 20, 2003
Author: *Lance Compa*

The U.S. labor movement is slipping into a final agony. That's the buzz after each year's Labor Department news showing a falling percentage of American workers belonging to unions. The latest report said 13.2 percent of workers were union members in 2002, down from 13.5 percent in 2001.

This "density" figure began dropping from 35 percent in the 1950s. It slipped below 20 percent in the 1980s at a time of wrenching corporate restructuring. Since then the drip, drip, drip of annual falling membership figures tortures labor advocates. Is it the sound of blood?

No. The union movement is still a vital wellspring in American social life. It flows up from more than 16 million workers who belong to unions, from thousands more forming new unions each year and from millions more who appreciate what unions do.

Numbers and percentages are not the whole story. Social dynamics and geography have weight, too. Employers feel labor's "proximate" power in industries and communities with rooted union presence, where workers are more aware of their rights. Many companies match union-won pay and benefits to avoid collective bargaining.

In 10 states bordering the Great Lakes and the Pacific, with half the U.S. population, union members are 20 percent of the labor force. Unions' proximate strength also affects political life. It starts in households, where union members are more engaged in community and social affairs than unorganized workers, and continues in electoral politics.

Everyone recognizes that economic changes squeeze the density figure. Less-organized service and technology sectors are growing. But fewer people realize that labor laws and court rulings exclude huge swaths of the labor force from even the possibility of collective representation -- independent contractors, low-level supervisors, farmworkers, civil servants in states that prohibit collective bargaining, federal workers lopped away from bargaining rights by the Bush administration in the name of national security, and others.

More than 30 million American workers are denied the right to bargain collectively. Nationwide, 20 percent of workers who are allowed to form unions and bargain are members of unions. If legislators passed laws so that others who have been denied bargaining rights organized at the same rate, 6 million new members would surge into the labor movement.

The drip, drip, drip of falling union membership is distressing, but key sectors of the economy still have strong union presence -- transport, construction, communications,

manufacturing, state and local government (where bargaining is allowed) and others. Thousands of workers choose union representation each year in votes held by the National Labor Relations Board, usually in the face of fierce employer opposition. Thousands more choose unions in what unions call "non-board" organizing under procedures worked out with employers who don't interfere in workers' self-organization efforts.

Beyond numbers, what unions are doing on the ground reflects their vitality. Unions are allying with new grass-roots support groups in creative public advocacy for workers' rights generally, not just for their own members. Unions are also experimenting with new forms of social bargaining, using leverage such as pension fund investments and shareholder resolutions. They do this for their own organizational goals, but also for public goals such as transparent corporate governance and honest corporate accounting.

U.S. unions have a new focus on solidarity with unions abroad, working together against multinational companies that abuse workers. Many idealistic young people are turning to labor movement work. In all, many unions are redefining themselves as part of a social movement, not just as bargaining agents.

In 1932 the president of the American Economic Association proclaimed that unions were finished. Membership had dropped steeply from a post-World War I high point. Human resources management and the emergence of new technologies requiring higher-skilled workers made unions obsolete, he argued. Within 15 years, the size of the labor movement had tripled.

History does not repeat itself, and conditions now are not the same as those spurring the great organizing drives of the 1930s and '40s. Still, American workers have shown deep resourcefulness over long cycles of trade union growth, decline and regeneration. The importance of freedom of association, the impulse to stick together and the need for "somebody to back me up" in the face of employer power never go away.

The writer, a former union representative in Washington, teaches international labor law at Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations.