Obits for Labor Unions Are Premature

Kate Bronfenbrenner
Cornell University, klb23@cornell.edu

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Abstract
[Excerpt] The press recently declared the end of the labor movement. It reported on a major new study by Harvard economist Richard Freeman and Joel Rogers of the University of Wisconsin, suggesting that American workers would prefer cooperative relationships with management to traditional labor unions.

Coupled with union membership at less than 16 percent of the work force and a new wave of far-from-pro-labor Republicans marching into Washington, many see this as definitive proof of labor’s obsolescence. A more careful analysis, however, reveals that this is far from the truth.

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Obits for Labor Unions Are Premature

By Tom Juravich and Kate Bronfenbrenner

The Press recently declared the end of the labor movement. It reported on a major new study by Harvard economist Richard Freeman and Joel Rogers of the University of Wisconsin, suggesting that American workers would prefer cooperative relationships with management to traditional labor unions.

Coupled with union membership at less than 16 percent of the workforce and a new wave of far-from-pro-labor Republicans marching into Washington, many see this as definitive proof of labor's obsolescence. A more careful analysis, however, reveals that this is far from the truth.

Workers are fired in one of every four union elections for pursuing their legal right to organize. Given that background, it should be no surprise that many no longer see unions as a practical means for achieving a voice in the workplace. No wonder the study found that workers grasp at any management-offered opportunity to contribute that doesn't involve a fight or threat to their job.

Yet, it is a leap of faith to assume that this increased interest in cooperation is of the same order that trade unionism was for workers a generation ago — and a genuine replacement for it.

What Freeman and Rogers have identified is not a new social movement about to burst forth on the scene. Instead, they have captured the quiet mass resignation of American workers to a system that robs them of any hope for real power on the job.

When the United Auto Workers or the United Mine Workers were born, they represented something very fundamental for workers and their families. They were a path out of poverty, out of the sweatshop.

Talk to workers in working-class bars, shopping malls or city offices today. There is no mass movement out there for the latest labor-management scheme. There are no rallies, no demonstrations, no passion for these programs — except maybe among the consultants.

If one had polled workers in the 1920s, the findings would have been very similar. Workers' organizations had been rendered powerless by the law. With few other options, many participated in the company unions that were the equivalent of today's employee-involvement programs.

Yet, just as today, these employee-representation plans did not embody the hopes and dreams of workers and their families. And as soon as the — Continued on Next Page
Trade unions will continue to exist in this country. For, no matter how embattled or how unfashionable, they remain the only vehicle for real power on the job for working Americans.