

# Recent Events and Future Unions

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How can unions increase their appeal to employees in the United States? Addressing this question requires facing the subsidiary issues of what workers want and what unions can do. We avoid rehashing well-known arguments on union decline (Fiorito and Maranto 1987) and obstacles to union success (see Fiorito [2007] and Godard [2008] for recent broad overviews). Instead, we focus on organizational and institutional changes that unions can make. We deliberately attempt to “think outside the box” and consider some provocative possibilities.

## What Do Workers Want?

A rational and thorough approach to this question involves examining research on what workers want and what unions can do to provide it. Let us begin with the issue of what workers want. Freeman, Boxall, and Haynes (2007) among others have examined this question. Although the research needs constant updating and critical assessment, the answer is mostly unsurprising. Workers want fairness, respect, meaningful work, adequate pay and benefits, prospects for improvement, employment security, and a real say on their jobs. Most workers understand that unions offer a means for pursuing these goals, but some doubt unions’ ability to achieve them. Others question whether unions can pursue these goals without adverse side effects such as workplace conflict or diminished competitiveness. In other words, many see unions as a risky proposition, even without considering the possibility of employer retaliation for union activity.

Another important question, infrequently asked, is whether unions should reconsider the price of membership. We have already alluded to costs and benefits, notwithstanding that several of these are difficult to quantify and highly uncertain. One of the more certain and tangible costs in the worker’s calculation is union dues. We examine trends in responses to questions about whether unions provide members with their money’s worth for dues. Some form of this question was asked at least as far back as 1977 (Kochan 1979) and as recently as 2011 (Krane 2011).

Workers’ calculations consider other factors as well. Previous research, as well as common sense, tells us that workers also care about honesty, democracy, social justice, and power—both in terms of wanting power and fearing its excesses. Although these latter concerns may not fit neatly into a cost–benefit calculation, they often come into play in decisions about unions. In sum, workers want effective representation that they can be proud of, and they want it with little or no risk and at low cost.

## What Can Unions Do?

What organizational and institutional changes can unions make to increase their appeal to workers? It might be useful to first enumerate some of the main things that unions do. They organize, recruit, bargain, lobby, publicize, educate, advocate, counsel, provide direct services and benefits, form coalitions, perform voluntary public service, and not least, *mobilize*, to advance their members’ interests, and secondarily, to advance their vision of a more just society. Any of these, plus other activities we failed to mention or that are

yet to be invented, may be critical in broadening union appeal. Still, one activity may be particularly important in the current environment.

Mobilization—the focus of the misnamed “organizing model”—deserves special consideration because it refers to the means by which unions activate what would seem to be their key comparative advantage, volunteerism. In terms of monetary or paid staff resources, unions are clearly overmatched by employers and their allies. Consistent with the organizing model advocates, we refer to mobilizing in a broad sense, from the workplace level of demonstrating shared discontent with a particular management action to the societal level as illustrated by recent protests over state government efforts to slash public employee compensation and bargaining rights and, arguably, the Occupy Wall Street movement.<sup>1</sup> These efforts have generated virtually unprecedented mobilization and substantial public support, at least in terms of goals. Between these micro and macro levels are other important forms of mobilization, including rallying members to support their bargaining teams and volunteer efforts to recruit and organize non-union workers.

The importance of mobilizing or activism has been argued elsewhere (Gall and Fiorito, in press; Jarley 2005). Hickey, Kuruvilla, and Lakhani (2010) noted that in more than 80% of successful instances of union renewal or revitalization, member activism played a critical role (p. 76). Limitations of mobilizing or of the organizing model have also been acknowledged (de Turberville 2004), and the servicing-organizing model’s distinction has been overblown (Banks and Metzgar 2005). Notwithstanding these caveats, the importance of member involvement and participation, activism, and the role of leadership in mobilization is difficult to overstate (see also Clark 2000:187). In brief, if we had to give one short answer to the question, “What should unions do?” our answer would be “Mobilize.” With that premise in mind, we now turn to some corollaries.

## What Should Unions Do? An Elaboration

### *Know the Territory*

A key mechanism for this is polling. The environmental challenges are huge and well-known. Massive job losses due to low-cost competition, hostile employers, a labor law framework that is often unhelpful and sometimes much worse, adverse shifts in public opinion and in the political climate, and perhaps other factors we have not yet considered have made a bad situation worse, and in a manner of speaking created an extremely hostile environment for unions. In early 2011, more than 700 bills were introduced in 48 states that limit collective bargaining rights or other key aspects of the public sector labor relations system. Much of this legislative assault stems from the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), a Koch brothers–backed group focused heavily on reducing union and worker rights (see, for example, Eskow 2011). It is too early to determine whether ongoing battles over public employee bargaining rights and compensation in Wisconsin, Ohio, Florida, and other states are simply a reflection of broader challenges or early signs of a potential resurgence. Polls suggest, however, that this threat may also offer an opportunity. By almost 2 to 1, New York Times/CBS and Wall Street Journal/NBC polls in early 2011 showed that Americans oppose laws similar to the Wisconsin bill that stripped public sector workers of bargaining rights (Cooper and Thee-Brenan 2011; O’Connor 2011). On November 8, 2011, Ohio voted almost 2 to 1 to repeal SB5, which radically restricted collective bargaining rights of all public employees in the state. The degree to which this vote is a general harbinger of change in public support for collective bargaining is unclear and ridden with caveats (Niquette and Rosenkrantz 2011; also see Jones 2011).

Dunlop (1958) long ago noted that contextual (environmental) factors can exert a decisive influence. Along with technology and markets, he identified “the locus and distribution of power in the larger society” or what one might call “societal” factors as critical contextual influences. One can think of law as effectuating an imperfect crystallization of more nebulous societal influences such as elected leaders and other prominent elites (e.g., fully mobilized and recently deregulated corporate interest lobbying), the media, and public opinion—what people think and believe. Various recent polls have shown a continuing decline in overall attitudes toward unions (e.g., Jones 2011; Pew Research Center 2010). Quite possibly, the recent assaults on unions and worker rights are opportunistic responses to the weakened public support suggested in these polls. Cappelli (2011) asked “[W]hy, when unions are at their weakest, does the public think they have too

much power ... why has support for them eroded so sharply?” and observed, “what happens inside our organizations depends more than we believe on what people outside our organizations think and believe.”

Polling, despite its critics, provides an economical way to learn about “the territory” from afar. Polling also offers value for informing the development of more effective responses to these environmental challenges. With strikes and boycotts decreasingly effective or banned by law, publicizing relevant communities’ views must increasingly be relied on to shame opposing business interests, or point out the likely consequences of neglect, including dissatisfaction and voter retaliation. Credibility is of course essential. It is well-known that polls can be manipulated, that how one frames the question or prompts respondents matters. Analysis and reporting are also critical. Even the best-designed and -conducted polls are worthless if the results are just thrown in a box and ignored, and a poll’s potential value may be grossly underexploited by a simple tally of results.

Polling’s value as a long-range tool needs to be complemented by short-range tools that can provide deeper understanding of superficial survey data. Such short-range tools include focus groups, field reports, and first-hand knowledge of participants in the environment. The latter also suggests the value of decentralized union decision making, although its value stems from other sources as well, notably in terms of commitment. A simple truth is that people tend to commit to strategies and tactics that they shape, and they resist or ignore those imposed from on high.

#### *Focus on What Unions Can Do*

Labor leaders and scholars need to focus on what actions and policies unions can pursue to cope with and overcome these challenges. It is important to recognize environmental challenges, but the environment is difficult to change, and usually slow to change even when it can be influenced.<sup>2</sup> Attention needs to focus on what unions themselves can do to address the challenges at hand. If a poll shows a positive change in public sentiment, how can unions build on this newfound goodwill? This is most certainly not to say that the environment should be neglected. Our earlier discussion of mobilization cautions against that. Knowing the environment can be useful even if it is hostile. For example, fine-grained information on individual campaigns might help us understand why a particular strategy or tactic failed in a particular campaign. It might tell us that the idea was sound, just implemented in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Further, although the environment is relatively fixed, now may be a time of historical discontinuity—like the Great Depression and New Deal. So while unions definitely have to focus on themselves and what they can change, they also need to respond to the huge turbulence in the political environment that both poses a threat and offers a possible source of resurgence.

#### *Better Knowledge and Information Make for Better Decisions*

The effectiveness of our models needs to be critically analyzed. There are all too many issues where decisions are based on poorly understood phenomena or poor information. Consider the organizing model once again. This model has been touted as a strategy to revitalize unions for more than 20 years. What does the evidence say about its value? There is strikingly little solid and systematic evidence for or against the model’s value and limitations, or the situational factors that strongly influence its success or failure. If it worked, that information needs to be disseminated to encourage adoption or adaptation as needed. If it did not work, we need to know why not, and move on in other directions based on that information. Similar points could be made about social movement unionism. Now may be a particularly propitious time to implement and assess it, perhaps via action research (see below).

#### *Transparency Is Labor’s Ally*

Someone said, “Bad managers are often like cockroaches. You turn on the light and they scatter.” (The public exposure of Wisconsin’s anti-union Governor Scott Walker’s “cozy relationship with two billionaire [Koch] brothers who have poured millions into conservative political causes” through a prank call from a supposed Koch brother comes to mind in such light, and although Walker survived the exposure, his stature surely declined in the eyes of many [Foley 2011].) There is a valid point in that simple and amusing cockroach metaphor. Open and honest approaches to issues and learning about issues, including union flaws

as well as virtues, will best serve unions. Society's short attention span and propensity to ignore any argument or analysis that cannot fit on a bumper sticker are often noted unfortunate trends. Still, openness and honesty, and demands for the same from others, will win out in the long run.

On a related point underscored by recent public sector conflicts, unions need to constantly fight misdirection. Observing similar problems for British unions, Bryson (2011) noted that to many, unions have come to be seen as a special interest, "fighting for the haves and not the have nots," citing pension issues as an example (Bryson 2011). As Bielski Borus (2011) stated, regarding the United States, "The public needs to more clearly see unions as a force that works to create a better life for all people." Cappelli (2011) noted that while U.S. opinion polls showed at least modest support for unions in early 2011's legislative battles, media stories "focused mainly on resentment against public sector employees and their deals."<sup>3</sup> The oft-told misdirection joke<sup>4</sup> about the public employee, the tea partier, and the corporate executive dividing a plate of cookies humorously underscores a serious problem also associated with the question, "What's the matter with Kansas?" (why do people often fail to see where their own interests lie?). Lincoln said "You can fool some of the people all the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time." Although many of us wonder *how long* majorities of voters or workers can be fooled, we have to believe that honesty and credibility—at least when effectively articulated—will eventually trump misdirection.

### *Getting the Message Across*

Complicated explanations tend to lose out to bumper stickers and sound bites. Unions have to keep making points based on credible information, but they have to take care to package them in digestible forms and, like a good teacher, find ways to relate the message to something that resonates with their audience's lived experience. In remarks on European and British unions, Hyman (2011) cited acceptance of "Eurospeak"—allowing debates and issues to be framed in terms of a pro-market liberalization strategy—as undercutting union strength. He argued that unions need to recapture language that can inspire mobilization. They have to be clever and use humor to help get through to intended message recipients. The Trades Union Congress in Britain has been sponsoring 60-second ad contests for three years now, and that contest has produced some interesting results (see <http://www.tuc60seconds.org.uk>). On a related point, Clark (2011) argued recently for the importance of symbols and language, including logos, in conveying union messages about their culture, an important influence on member commitment and union capacity to mobilize. In a world of short attention spans, symbolic communication takes on great importance.

Unions also have to avoid *information overload*—more is not always better. People are overwhelmed with information. They often sign up for magazines, newsletters and, perhaps especially, electronic messages that they never read. What is the optimal level of communication? Does it differ for different groups, such as employed workers versus retirees? How can one adjust communications to try to achieve an optimal level for different groups or for different issues? Strategic use of social media may aid in this effort to customize the information flow.

### *Do Unions Need a New "Value Proposition"?*

In the 1950s, roughly one-third of American workers chose conventional union membership; that is, they chose to pay the established dues rates in exchange mainly for bargaining representation and contract enforcement services. Today it is less than one-eighth of the workforce—less than 12% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012). If the contemporary assault on public sector unions—now the majority of union members—is successful, union membership could quickly plummet even further. In a fundamentally market-based economy and an ideological climate that tends to favor markets, it is worth asking whether unions need to reconsider what they offer to workers, the price they ask, or both. Unions need to look carefully at their current offerings, where their comparative advantages lie, and how these relate to what today's and tomorrow's workers want.

Basic economic theory prompts us to recall the concept of long-run marginal cost (LRMC) pricing. In short, the optimal and lowest pricing strategy in a competitive market is one that recovers the cost of providing the product or service offered, including the required return on investment. Assuming a normal demand curve, too high a price means sales are foregone that would add revenue in excess of cost; too low a

price means going out of business. What is the long-run marginal cost of providing union representation services? Obviously it varies greatly with the “product.” Freeman (2008) estimated the cost of organizing a conventional union member at \$1,000–\$2,000, while he put the estimated the cost of enlisting a Working America member at \$8.

Working America is an interesting point of reference for additional reasons. Freeman described it as a rough test of the validity of polling data that have consistently shown that large portions of non-union workers, typically 30%–50%, favor union representation (2007:41). He noted that Working America’s rapid growth—from zero to about 1.4 million members by 2006, in the span of a few years—can be viewed as evidence that workers would indeed join unions more readily in the absence of employer opposition. Working America has since reportedly expanded to about 3 million members, impressive growth indeed. But in addition to abstracting from employer opposition (and fear of workplace conflict, another uncontrolled confound), this experiment is also contaminated by the manipulation of price. Working America dues are voluntary, so the nominal price is zero. Only 15% of its members have contributed (Freeman 2008).

So, the value of Working America as an experiment on dues-price sensitivity is questionable. But between a price of zero and current dues levels (often approximated as one or two hours pay per month or 1%–2% of earnings), there may be LRMC values that could induce considerably higher membership levels and increase overall revenue. In addition, there are other possible value proposition innovations such as “open-source” unionism that merit consideration, by which “[m]embership would take a different form in different settings and with different union affiliations. Lacking collective bargaining, open-source members would pay lower dues than workers in traditional majority status union settings—perhaps just a nominal amount” (Freeman 2004:7).

Looking at polling data (see Table 1, next page), it is clear that union members’ perception that they “get their money’s worth” from their dues, while never overwhelming, has declined substantially over time. In the 1977 Quality of Employment Survey (QES), 57% of union members believed that they got their money’s worth from their union dues, compared to 44% of non-union workers (Quinn and Staines 1977). In a 2011 Harris poll, only 44% of individuals in union households believed union members got their money’s worth from union dues, compared to 37% of individuals in non-union households (Krane 2011).<sup>5</sup> Although these data are not perfectly comparable, there does seem to be a declining perception that union dues are a sound economic value proposition. Additional comparisons from these two polls suggest more strongly that workers perceive declining union effectiveness. In response to questions about whether unions “improve the wages and working conditions of workers,” QES respondents in 1977 overwhelmingly agreed: 93% of union members and 89% of non-members agreed or strongly agreed. In the 2011 Harris poll, only 72% of those in union households and only 64% of those in non-union households agreed or agreed strongly<sup>6</sup>. At the risk of oversimplification, the two choices would appear to be increase the value of the service provided or reduce the price.

The question of appropriate pricing for union services has gained great urgency of late, although from a different perspective. Many state legislative proposals prohibit dues withholding through “fair share” agreements while simultaneously and dramatically reducing the on-the-job benefits of unionization (through unilaterally imposed benefits concessions and severely limited wage bargaining). In Wisconsin, annual recertification elections are now required by law. Ninety-two percent of teacher locals in school districts without contracts filed for recertification elections—despite the state teachers’ union leaving it entirely up to the locals, with no visible pressure. (Many state employee unions did not file for recertification.) The results of those elections, released in December, showed that 177 out of 206 local teacher unions were recertified. This outcome suggests a continued desire for union representation, and perhaps a willingness of public employees to pay dues. The success in collecting the dues without dues deduction from paychecks remains to be seen. It is worth noting that this is a particularly stringent test of the question, given that the law essentially prohibits unions from providing effective collective bargaining services. Public sector unions will need a new value proposition to withstand this latest challenge.

TABLE 1  
Beliefs About Unions: Selected Comparisons for 1977 and 2011

Questions from 1977 QES	1977 QES <sup>1</sup> % Agree or Strongly Agree	2011 Harris <sup>2</sup> % Agree or Agree Strongly	Questions from 2011 Harris Poll
How much do you agree or disagree that unions in this country improve the wages and working conditions of workers?			Please indicate if you agree strongly, agree somewhat, disagree somewhat, or disagree strongly that unions improve wages and working conditions of workers
Union members	93	72	Union households
Non-members	89	64	Non-union households
How much do you agree or disagree that unions in this country give members their money's worth for the dues they pay?			Please indicate if you agree strongly, agree somewhat, disagree somewhat, or disagree strongly that unions give members their money's worth for the dues they pay
Union members	57	47	Union households
Non-members	44	37	Non-union households

<sup>1</sup> Valid responses: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree

<sup>2</sup> Valid responses: agree strongly, agree somewhat, disagree strongly, disagree somewhat

Sources: Authors' tallies from the 1977 Quality of Employment Survey (Quinn and Staines 1977) and tallies reported by Krane (2011) from the 2011 Harris poll. See text for additional details regarding comparability.

### *The Assault on Public Sector Workers: Threats and Opportunities*

This last point clearly relates to the earlier discussion of the organizing model and the necessity of member mobilization, as well as the importance of the social and political context within which union power is always negotiated. The apparent ALEC-based national blueprint for state-level policy changes includes, in addition to provisions designed to weaken and quite possibly eliminate public sector unions, dramatic cuts to education spending and social safety net programs (e.g., Medicaid), while simultaneously cutting corporate taxes. Thus, the opportunity—and necessity—of coalition building, and a renewed emphasis on the labor movement's societal role in income distribution arises. The large crowds of demonstrators, of union members and non-members, in Wisconsin and the defeat of the anti-union law in Ohio, suggest that much of the public perceives unions as instrumental in the broader political struggle over the nature of government services and of our society. Whether this perception can be broadened and sustained may be a crucial factor in union survival and growth.

The Occupy Wall Street movement, which emerged after we started writing this paper, brings the question of the union role in the movement against income inequality into stark relief. Most observers have noted the naturally shared goals of both movements, but also the many obstacles to actually working together—the young, largely non-union demographic of Occupy Wall Street, its purposeful lack of formal leaders or specific demands (Bragg 2011), the strictures of labor law that prohibit strikes during contracts (hence, most unions' inability to join in the general strike called by Occupy Oakland) and that require a focus on enterprise bargaining (hence, a U.S. labor movement that is far less active in broader social issues than its international counterparts) (Toff and McCallum 2011). Polling data show 71% of Americans view unions as fighting rather than bringing about change, and 59% believe unions advocate for legislation that only benefits their members (Krane 2011). Related evidence from Britain suggest that those of the "Facebook generation ... share union concerns but don't see unions as the answer" (Bryson 2011). These data suggest why Occupy Wall Street may be skeptical of the union support that has been offered. Nonetheless, the potential for the union movement and the Occupy movement to join forces is great. Whether and how this might occur may well signal a turning point for unions.

### *Promote Innovation*

To paraphrase Albert Einstein, “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result.” Membership and election trends, among others, suggest that, in general, what unions are doing is not producing the desired result. Experimentation with innovations may generate something that can. “If there is one message from labor history for the future of unions, it is that *if unionism manages to recover from the endangered species list, it will be through a new growth spurt associated with some new union form and new mode of operating*” (Freeman 2004:5, emphasis in original). But one also has to accept the fact that some innovations will fail and be willing to take the risk that goes with innovation.

In order to innovate, unions should promote creative, even wacky, thinking. Studies of innovation, creativity, and decision making suggest that, at least in the early stages, it is necessary to overcome inhibition and ban criticism. Sometimes wacky ideas turn out to have a kernel of considerable value that can be developed into a not-so-wacky idea that works and has a profound influence. Imagine the top brass sitting around at IBM in the 1950s, when the company was making great strides and achieving great success in developing ever-bigger computers, and some clown says, “We should think more about offering small computers that people can use in their homes and at their desks.”

### **Concluding Remarks**

Cook’s famous truism, “no two unions are alike” (1962:327), reminds us that unions are a diverse and autonomous lot, and that these differences do influence outcomes (Maranto and Fiorito 1987). At this very moment, local and national unions are adopting innovations and conducting experiments (perhaps even some wacky ones). They are enjoying the benefits or suffering the consequences of those innovations and experiments. There is a diversity of union experience both in Britain and the United States. Wilson (2007) observed that British professional worker unions are growing in the midst of broader union decline. Similar diversity amidst general decline was noted for U.S. unions as well (Fiorito and Jarley 2010). Unions tend to jealously guard their autonomy and may be understandably wary of “outsiders” asking questions about their strategies, tactics, and results. Unions may be particularly sensitive to questions about failed experiments.

Despite the obstacles, there is potentially much more to be learned from the sheer diversity of union experience in the innovations that they adopt and the experiments that they undertake. However, information sharing will be necessary in order to compare and analyze these experiences so that the learning potential of these experiences can be exploited to chart a path to union revitalization.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> One key focus of the Occupy movement has been economic inequality. As Neufeld (1982) noted, this has been a core theme in U.S. labor movement philosophies since the early 1800s and has persisted. “The widening gap between the relatively few rich people holding wealth and controlling corporate power and the many millions of low- and middle-income families threatens the underpinning of a democracy ... Appropriate and fair income distribution must be a major concern of general economic and taxing policies ... Policies should be pursued to help workers gain their share of the benefits of economic progress” (Neufeld 1982:212 quoting AFL-CIO platform proposals and other sources). Recent empirical research reinforces the nexus between union decline and growing inequality (e.g., Western and Rosenfeld 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Farber and Western (2004) provided various calculations that suggest even fairly sweeping labor law changes would have a modest impact on union growth rates.

<sup>3</sup> In a related argument, Bruno (2011) posited that unions should discard the “less threatening and cognitively misleading” language of “middle class” champion for the “more politically potent identity of working class defender.”

<sup>4</sup> The joke: A corporate executive, a public sector union employee, and a tea partier are sitting at a table with a plate of 12 cookies. The executive scoops up 11 of the cookies and says to the tea partier, “Watch that union guy. He wants part of your cookie!”

<sup>5</sup> Both questions asked whether unions in this country (QES) or unions (Harris) “give members their money’s worth for the dues they pay.” But, in addition to very slight differences in question wording and

response scales (e.g., the QES offered a neutral choice that we omitted from our tallies), the member versus non-member comparison in the QES compared to the union household versus non-union household comparison in the Harris poll quite likely affects the results, although we believe the overall trend in beliefs suggested is accurately depicted.

<sup>6</sup> In contrast, and curiously in view of general similarities, British workers have increasingly over the past 20-some years agreed with a statement to the effect that the “workplace union” is “doing its job well” (Bryson 2011). One might speculate that the contrast could stem partly from the reference to a “workplace union” compared to the more typical “unions” term used in the U.S. polls just referenced.

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