

The Union in Us

Why Labor's Decline Hastens the Unraveling of America

By Michael Kazin

DO WE really need unions? Not so long ago, only aging reactionaries who viewed collective bargaining as a communist plot would have answered in the negative. However, as Americans mark the 113th Labor Day (a holiday unionists invented), the question has a fresh urgency. Most hourly workers have seen their real wages decline and job security vanish. But few expect the shrunken labor movement to improve their status.

Today, both modem-happy entrepreneurs and many managers of Fortune 500 companies utilize every available method, legal and illegal, to keep unions out of their firms and to break ones that already exist. Meanwhile, the Republicans who control Congress handcuff the Occupational Safety and Health Administration and refuse to strengthen penalties against employers who fire workers for trying to organize. Not many Americans, aside from an embattled group of labor officials and stalwart rank-and-filers, seem to consider unions worth defending.

That is a tragedy, and not just for those who still cherish Labor Day as something more than a three-day weekend. To be sure, unions have not always been the faithful representatives of workers' interests. A bullying official who lives it up on his members' dues makes good copy and casts all of organized labor in a sordid light. But through the first two-thirds of the 20th century, strong unions helped make America a more prosperous and more democratic society. And labor's diminished status—

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struggling now to hold onto barely 15 percent of the work force—has contributed to the mean, cynical, divisive tenor of our public life.

Since 1982, the average paycheck has declined, after discounting for inflation, by about 15 percent while corporate productivity and corporate profits continue to rise. Almost one-fifth of American workers hold jobs that pay below the official poverty line of \$13,000 a year. And both Robert Reich and Newt Gingrich praise the brave new labor market in which wage-earners must prepare themselves to change jobs every few years.

That is not the way America became the world's first middle-class nation. Our economic Golden Age—from World War II through the 1960s—was the era when union membership averaged close to 30 percent, the highest level in history. Breadwinners with stable jobs and wages that kept pace with the cost of living created a booming consumer market. Despite labor's current woes, union workers still earn, in wages and benefits, an average of 33 percent more than their nonunion counterparts.

Union weakness also exacerbates the uneasy state of black-white relations. And it deprives new immigrants of an indispensable weapon to combat brazen employers like SK Fashions, a clothing manufacturer in Southern California where Thai women toiled for years in prison-like conditions until state regulators cracked down this summer.

Racial tensions are, of course, rooted in centuries of slavery, the decades of Jim Crow that followed, and in white anger at such remedies as affirmative action. But the absence of a movement in which wage-earners of both races and a variety of national origins can fight for common ends

makes it difficult to forge understanding across the color line.

In contrast, the labor upsurge that began in the mid-1930s knit together working-class ethnic communities that had always been at odds. As part of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), blacks and whites, Jews and Irish Catholics, Anglos and Chicanos, built unions of mine workers, auto workers and meat packers. Black activists like A. Philip Randolph, Bayard Rustin and Coleman Young fought, with marked success, to forge an interracial labor movement, while leading white liberal unionists like Walter Reuther and Jerry Wurf lobbied for the passage of civil rights laws and denounced racism within their own ranks. The slogan of the historic 1963 March on Washington was "Jobs and Freedom," and tens of thousands of union members attended—even though AFL-CIO President George Meany frowned on public protest.

Only when labor began to decline did the conservative condemnation of a wide range of (nonmilitary) federal programs grow in popularity. While there is a strong libertarian tradition in the United States, the present round of government-bashing is directed at domestic initiatives begun in the 1960s and '70s—like Medicaid, the Environmental Protection Agency and the National Endowment for the Arts. But older programs that unionists spearheaded in the heyday of their movement, earlier this century, remain overwhelmingly popular: Social Security, workers' compensation laws, the eight-hour day and the minimum wage. Their liberal promoters justified such laws with the labor adage that those who worked hard should be justly rewarded and respected. No one could brand such measures "welfare" for the lazy, the privileged or the bureaucratic.

Most Americans don't hate government on principle; they balk at paying taxes to reward people perceived as nonproductive or culturally peculiar. So labor's shrinking presence has enabled conservatives to brand liberals as "elitists" who care little for the problems of "average people." New Deal Democrats swept into the majority in the 1930s and early '40s with the energetic support of swelling unions. When John L. Lewis told delegates to the 1939 CIO convention that they were the "main driving force" of all "liberal elements in the community," he was not being hyperbolic.

Liberals could convincingly identify with the needs of working people (whether or not they called themselves "middle class") as long as labor was vital to setting the Democratic agenda. But with the decline of unions, the broad left lost its grounding in the lives and language of wage-earning Americans. Had unions been a more powerful force when the Democrats controlled Congress in 1993-94, every working American and their family would probably enjoy guaranteed health insurance today.

Finally, labor's woes contribute to the general decay of civic life. For more than a decade, intellectuals such as Robert Bellah, Jean Bethke Elshtain and Robert Putnam have worried over the hollowing out or disappearance of ethnic clubs, neighborhood centers, PTAs and even bowling leagues. Alienation from and apathy toward one's neighbors, they write, now permeate both big cities and suburbia in the age of multimedia. Some of the blame, as economist Juliet Schor has demonstrated, can be placed on the ever-lengthening work week that both men and women endure. Strong unions once made it harder, through threats of punishing strikes and the achievement of higher wages, for bosses to demand routine overtime as a virtual condition of employment. And the labor movement encouraged workers and their families to spend some of their leisure time on community affairs—whether by scrutinizing school curricula, exposing municipal corruption or running for local office.

Unions were often educational institutions as well. The labor movement spon-

sored summer "colleges" at which young activists with little formal schooling learned about history, science and literature—as well as how to organize their shop mates. And most union newspapers were quite different from today's thin, self-congratulatory sheets. In the '30s, '40s and '50s, scores of bright young journalists edited or contributed to the labor press or, like A. H. Raskin of the New York Times, sympathetically reported on the rise of union power for mainstream readers. At their best, unions, like churches, inspired their members with a common vision and gave them an arena in which to work toward it, day by day.

It will be difficult for organized labor to regain that hopeful image, much less to restore something of the clout it once enjoyed in workplaces and Congress. Both men who are currently vying to head the AFL-CIO, John Sweeney and Thomas Donahue, promise to channel greater resources to organizing new members and, for the first time, to open up the leadership circle to blacks, Latinos and women of all races. Such steps, while essential, will do little to reverse labor's decline as long as the economic and political establishments are so hostile and business can, with relative impunity, move jobs around the world to find less expensive workers.

Yet our need for a labor movement is inescapable. When unions were strong, they did more than provide workers a concerted, collective voice on the job—as important as that was and is to our material and psychic well-being. In the larger sense, they helped make the United States a more tolerant nation in which working people enjoyed more influence over politics and a greater share of the wealth than they do today. The lack of such a movement abets the widespread feeling that the average man or woman is powerless to affect what authorities do in Washington or on Wall Street. When you contemplate a nation without unions, consider this: Do you want America to be a democracy in fact or just in name?