

Workers' Views of Labor Unions: A Focus Group Perspective

By Marcela Miguel Berland and Susan Jessop

In August 1993, KRC Research and Consulting conducted for the Labor Research Association a large focus group study designed to explore how contemporary American workers view unions. Eight focus groups were assembled, two each in the cities of New York, Mobile, Pittsburgh, and Los Angeles.¹ These focus group sessions probed the attitudes of various groups of workers—distinguished by race and ethnicity, gender, income levels, and types of jobs. The importance of this subject is evident enough given organized labor's steady decline in terms of the proportion of workers belonging to unions. Today, fewer than 12% of America's private-sector workers are represented by unions, a steady decline from nearly 40% in the mid-1950s.

In the past, high wages, benefits, and the advancement of employees' rights were the dominant issues in the workplace. Today, job security has become one of the premier workplace issues. Although many employees believe that unions can help them negotiate higher wages, they also believe that in doing so, unions can adversely affect the productivity of American companies by not being sensitive to their competitive needs. As a consequence, they might, then, obtain better wages for their union members, but at a very high cost. This explains, to some degree, employees' contradictory and even antagonistic attitudes toward the unions.

Three Broad Sets of Attitudes

We can divide respondent attitudes toward unions into three broad categories. The first group stresses the *value of unions* in the workplace. They see unions as the only viable and effective tool for workers' rights. This group is mainly composed of union members, of non-unionized blue-collar and lower status workers, and those who work for large organizations—particularly where downsizing is a concern.

There was a strong feeling among most union members that they were better off than those with no organized representation. In the focus groups, when we presented respondents with hypothetical problems or when they talked of their personal experiences, the union was usually viewed as the first line of defense. If something happens, the union is there to help. Some non-union members also felt that if you have a union you have "more rights."

The second group has *mixed feelings about unions*—seeing unions as "a necessary evil." This group, a mix of blue-collar

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workers (particularly employees of small companies) with some white-collar workers, holds contradictory views about unions. They think unions still have a role in the workplace, but they are not certain whether unions help American workers or hurt them. In addition, they are not sure of the best answer to today's workplace problems—unions, or more direct employer-employee relationships.

The third group believes that *unions are obsolete*. They strongly reject the notion that unions effectively represent workers. This was mainly the attitude of white-collar and high-ranking workers (e.g. supervisors, managers). In the latter view, unions were strong in the 1940s and 1950s because employers did not respect workers' rights. With time, however, unions achieved their objectives, and started to

become unnecessary. Moreover, they have continued to demand more rights for workers, even to the point of damaging the general economy, and ultimately, workers themselves. This group believes that management and labor should communicate directly, without using an intermediary, building upon the common interests between companies and their employees.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Unions

In the eight focus groups, participants were asked what they perceived to be unions' positive and negative attributes. The majority of respondents acknowledge the important role of unions in advancing worker rights. In addition, they see unions as an effective check on the power of management. Many even accepted the premise that by increasing employees' incomes, unions are good for the whole economy. On the negative side, workers are concerned with the impact unions have on the profitability of American companies. They feel that some unions have gone "too far" in advancing workers' rights. Nearly all respondents portray union *leaders* as "greedy," "corrupt," and "out of touch."

Many women see unions as a male-dominated institution. Especially those who are union members complained that since unions are mostly headed by men, they are not sensitive to women's issues—such as sexual harassment, pay equity, subtle sexism, etc.

Why Unions Have Declined

Although an overwhelming majority of our respondents agree that the power of unions has been eroding dramatically during recent decades, the explanations given for this phenomenon were diverse. Many attribute this erosion mainly to structural changes. These derive from new technologies and market developments resulting in a transformation in actual working condi-

tions. During the last decades, the economic system of the country has dramatically changed: e.g., the decline of manufacturing; the increase in service and information sectors; the increase in international competition; etc. Many respondents now believe that for companies to survive, and for workers to keep their jobs, all have to work together. Sometimes this means that employees' rights have to be restricted. While in the past, workers fought to advance their rights. Today, in an economic environment of uncertainty, workers feel compelled, both by self-interest and organizational pressures, to put their energy into improving their company's competitive position, even if that means backing off on wages and benefits.

Another important, though less frequently cited, factor involves unions themselves. As noted, many respondents believe that union leaders are not in touch with workers. Leaders are perceived as having individual agendas geared toward personal gain. Union leaders today often lack the charisma to attract new members. One member complained that before joining her union, she asked for information and the union leaders told her, "join and then we talk."

Joining a Union

Respondents who *favor* joining a union are, not surprisingly, often those who are the most dissatisfied with aspects of their jobs, such as benefits, wages, and safety and health conditions. Although many respondents believe that unions have been abusing their power, some of them also think that employers have been very abusive to employees. As a result, they feel unions are "the only force that can fight back against management's abuse." As one white-collar male in Mobile put it:

"I've always been afraid of unions, especially in the high-tech industries...because I thought that unions restricted work. But as I've seen the abuses of employers, I've warmed up to unions." Job security is a recurrent concern of workers. Some participants feel that being unionized will increase their job security.

On the other hand, those *not interested in joining a union* see no real benefit and believe there would be danger in doing so. Although some express positive feelings toward unions in general and even agree that unions could be good for *other* workers, they think that they themselves are better off not being part of a union. We found that many respondents think that they do not have any serious problems at work. Unions are only for those who face such problems.

There were also those who showed some interest in joining a union, but were worried that they might get fired if they tried to organize. *Fear of management's negative reaction was an important barrier to respondents' interest in joining a union.* They were not willing to risk their job security.

There was also a feeling that *unions work better for large companies.* Many people say that if they worked for a larger company they would join a union, but in a small firm, they saw no need. This idea was widely expressed by the majority of employees in New York who were currently employed by small companies. They felt that direct communication with management suited them better, but acknowledged that workers in larger companies needed channels like unions.

What These Workers Had to Say About the Future of Unions

Our focus group explorations made clear that a great many American workers still see a need for labor unions. They think, however, that unions need to operate differently than they have in the past and to pursue somewhat different objectives. The following observations, by two of our participants, illustrate recurring themes as to the future of organized labor in the US.

I think we need unions just as much as before—but I also think unions need to change their direction. They need to be more fair, and union officials should be less concerned with how much money they make, and work on achieving harmony among the members. Old unions are out; I would love to see a new union.

I think unions are coming back in. But the old, mob-type unions are done with.

Endnotes:

¹ In New York, one group was composed of women in white-collar professions; the other, of men in blue-collar jobs. Both groups included whites and African-Americans, and union and non-union members. In Mobile, one of the groups was composed of lower- to middle-income women, the other of lower- to middle-income men. Again, both groups included whites and blacks and union and non-union members, and in this case, were as well mixtures of blue- and white-collar workers. The two Pittsburgh focus groups were, respectively, of middle- to upper-income non-union members, and middle-income unionists. Both Pittsburgh groups included men and women, and whites and blacks, and blue- and white-collar workers. In Los Angeles, one focus group was comprised of African Americans of lower- to middle-income status, the other of whites and Hispanics of middle- to upper-incomes. Again, both groups comprised men and women, union and non-union members, and blue-collar and white-collar employees.

The authors conducted this study as part of a larger project done by KRC Research and Consulting in conjunction with Greg Tarpinian of the Labor Research Association. Marcela Miguel Berland is vice president and Susan Jessop is senior vice president, KRC Research and Consulting