

what the public really wants on unions

by ruy teixeira

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Labor Day Special!

This Labor Day, union membership now stands at only 12 percent of all workers and just over 7 percent of all private sector workers—dismal numbers after three decades of steady decline for the labor union movement that won us our end-of-summer three-day weekend. Yet a look at the public's views on labor unions shows that slipping union membership is not at all related to anti-union sentiment. Direct measurements of the public's views indicate that Americans' opinion of labor unions is unusually positive and that interest in joining unions is at historically high levels.

That's why it is wrong to conclude from these union membership figures that workers are simply losing interest in labor unions. Indeed, it appears that worker concern about deteriorating job quality, employee benefits, and worker voice is having precisely the opposite effect: increasing worker interest in union representation. This suggests that reducing barriers to unionization through measures such as the Employee Free Choice Act, which passed through the House of Representatives earlier this year and would allow card-check recognition of unions, would likely be welcomed by the American public and lead to a substantial increase in union membership.

Current Assessments of Unions

The Gallup poll has tracked public sentiment about unions for many years. Their most recent survey on unions, conducted in August 2006, found that 59 percent of Americans approve of labor unions, compared to only 29 percent who disapprove.

Approval of Labor Unions

59 percent approve of
labor unions.

29 percent disapprove.

August 2006 Gallup data

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Gallup's August 2005 poll also found that, for the first time since they started asking the question in 1999, a plurality of respondents (38 percent to 30 percent) said they wanted unions to have more, rather than less, influence in the country. The same poll asked whether, in labor disputes of the past two to three years, their sympathies had been with unions or companies. Survey participants sided with unions 52 percent to 34 percent—a wider margin in favor of unions than was seen back in 1999, and even in 1952 when Gallup asked the same question.

The 2006 Gallup poll asked the public whether unions mostly help or hurt workers who are union members. Seventy-one percent said unions mostly help members, and only 21 percent said unions mostly hurt them (the analogous figures for whether workers who are not union members are helped by unions were 33 percent help/51 percent hurt). In a similar question, 53 percent of respondents said unions help the U.S. economy and 39 percent said they harm it. Finally, by 50 percent to 39 percent, respondents said unions mostly help companies where workers are unionized.

Interest in Joining Unions

Pro-union sentiments are also fully reflected in current levels of worker interest in joining unions. Hart Research has been tracking this sentiment for the AFL-CIO since 1993, using the following question: “If an election were held tomorrow to decide whether your workplace would have a union or not, do you think you would definitely vote for forming a union, probably vote for forming a union, probably vote against forming a union, or definitely vote against forming a union?” Hart Research has found a remarkable increase in the number of non-managerial non-union workers saying they would vote for a union in their workplace. As their report on their February 2005 survey noted:

“As with general support for unions, interest in union representation on the job has increased in recent years. Among all [non-union] non-managerial workers, 53 percent now say that they definitely or probably would vote in favor of union representation in their

Labor Dispute Sympathies

52 percent sided with unions during labor disputes in the past two to three years.

34 percent sided with companies in the past two to three years.

August 2005 Gallup data

Do Unions Help or Hurt Members?

71 percent said unions mostly help members.

21 percent said unions mostly hurt them.

August 2006 Gallup data

workplace, with 38 percent who would vote no. By comparison, in 2003, we find an even division in the vote on union representation: 47 percent vote yes and 47 percent vote no. This result and a similar response in a 2002 AFL-CIO survey (50 percent yes) mark a very substantial improvement over the previous decade. In both 1993 and 1996, the ‘yes’ vote stood at just 39 percent among non-union workers, while a majority indicated that they would vote no. From 1997 to 2001, support rose slightly to about 43 percent yes, but opposition still stood above 50 percent. Now support for union representation equals or exceeds opposition—a substantial change from sentiment in the early 1990s.”

These results are even more impressive considering that Harris asked the same question as Hart Research way back in 1984 and found that a mere 30 percent said they would likely vote for a union, while 65 percent said they would likely vote against. Hart Research’s pro-union 2005 results are therefore quite an amazing shift in sentiment.

It is also worth noting that the exceptionally positive 2005 results were not an anomaly. Hart Research repeated the question nine months ago, in December 2006, and found that 53 percent of non-managerial, non-union workers would likely vote for a union in their workplace, compared to 42 percent who would vote against.

Workers’ interest in joining and organizing unions is especially impressive since there is widespread and well-founded anxiety that such efforts will result in reprisals from their employers. As the Commission on the Future of Worker-Management Relations, chaired by former Secretary of Labor John Dunlop, reported in 1994, 59 percent of workers surveyed said they would likely lose favor with their employer if they supported an organizing drive, and 79 percent agreed that it was “very” or “somewhat” likely that “non-union workers will get fired if they try to organize a union.”

A Hart Research survey conducted in 2005 also found that workers thought, by a ratio of more than two to one, that “employers generally oppose the union and try to convince employees to vote no” in NLRB elections (53 percent), rather than that “employers generally take no position and let the employees decide on their own” (26 percent).

Are Workers interested in Joining Unions?

53 percent of non-managerial, non-union workers would likely vote for a union in their workplace.

42 percent would vote against unions.

December 2006, Hart Research

What’s Driving Worker Interest in Joining Unions?

Workers' increased interest in joining unions is probably due to workers' sense that job quality, employee benefits, and worker voice are all increasingly uncertain in today's workplace. This trend is shown very convincingly by data from 1999 and 2005 surveys conducted by Hart Research, where workers were asked the following question:

"Thinking generally about companies and other employers and the way they treat employees, let me mention some different aspects of work, and please tell me how well employers are doing on each item. Are employers doing very well, doing fairly well, falling somewhat short, or falling very short when it comes to ... [different workplace issues]."

According to analysis by Harvard economist Richard Freeman in a recent report for the Economic Policy Institute, the gap between the number who said employers are doing well on these issues and the number who said employers are falling short increased substantially between 1999 and 2005. For example, on four "bread and butter" issues—providing cost of living raises, providing retirement benefits, providing jobs that offer good benefits and job security, and paying a fair share of employees' health care costs—the average for employers' doing well was 45 percent in 1999, compared to 50 percent for falling short, a gap of five points. By 2005, that gap had ballooned to 31 points, as an average of just 33 percent thought employers were doing well on these issues, compared to 64 percent who thought they were falling short.

There was a more modest increase in the gap between employers doing well and falling short on four future opportunities/work conditions issues: providing opportunities for advancement, adopting policies that help working parents, giving employees the education and training they need, and providing women with equal pay. In 1999, the average gap was two points, a gap that increased to seven points in 2005, with an average of 43 percent saying employers were doing well on these issues, compared to 50 percent who thought employers were falling short.

But on four workplace relations issues—being loyal to long-term employees, showing concern for employees, not just the financial bottom line, listening to employees' ideas and concerns, and profit-sharing when a company does well—the increase in the gap was more

How Employers Rate on "Bread and Butter Issues"

- Providing cost of living raises.
- Providing retirement benefits.
- Providing jobs that offer good benefits.
- Job security and paying a fair share of employees' health care costs.

An average of **33 percent** thought employers were doing well.

An average of **64 percent** thought they were falling short.

Hart Research 2005 survey

substantial. In 1999, the average gap between employers doing well and falling short was 17 points; by 2005 that gap had increased to 29 points, with an average of just 33 percent thinking employers were doing well on these four issues, compared to 62 percent who believed employers were falling short.

General Interest in Worker Representation

It is important to stress that data showing interest in joining unions substantially underestimate general interest in worker representation. Many workers who do not express an interest in voting for a union nevertheless say they are interested in some form of employee organization in the workplace. For example, in Hart Research's 2001 survey of attitudes toward unions, 43 percent said they would likely vote for a union in their workplace.

In the same survey, workers were asked: "And suppose there were a proposal to form an employees association in your workplace that was not a union, but that would represent the interests of employees and meet regularly with management to discuss important workplace issues. Would you definitely vote for, probably vote for, probably vote against, or definitely vote against forming an employees association?" This elicited a much higher 78 percent positive response. Putting the two questions together, the Freeman study found that 39 percent of workers favored both a union and an association, and another 35 percent opposed a union but favored an association.

These findings suggest that another way of facilitating unionization, besides dismantling barriers to unionization as the Employee Free Choice Act seeks to do, is to tap into this broader pro-representation sentiment. Numerous studies indicate that many workers, professional and technical employees in particular, have a strong interest in new kinds of organizations that would offer education, training, and credentialing for jobs; give voice to their concerns regarding improving the quality of their products and services; and seek, when possible, to cooperate with management. Such organizations would be a sort of hybrid of the traditional craft unions and professional associations and the newer professional unions such as those for teachers and engineers.

A 2000 Hart Research poll of professional and technical employees for the Albert Shanker Institute, found that 67 percent of respondents wanted an organization that "speaks out for

Q: If there were a proposal to form an employees association in your workplace that was not a union, but that would represent the interests of employees and meet regularly with management to discuss important workplace issues, would you vote for it?

A: 78 percent supported the proposal for an employee association.

Hart Research's 2001 survey

quality;” 64 percent wanted one that provides “professional training,” and 67 percent wanted one that “works with management.” By way of comparison, only 58 percent mentioned “salaries/raises” as a major concern, and the same percentage wanted a group that “stands up to management.”

Concern about conflict with the employer is especially important for professional and technical employees. As Professor Richard Hurd of the Cornell University School of Industrial and Labor Relations wrote in a study of this sector of the workforce: “For professional and technical workers, the key attraction of employee organizations is that they give workers a voice. The key reason for not joining any employee organization is concern that they may create a conflict at work.”

Conclusion

Public opinion data indicate that worker interest in unions and worker representation is currently high by historical standards. These interest levels dwarf the anemic level of unionization in this country, which indicates that demand for unions and worker representation is running far ahead of supply. The data presented here further suggest that a combination of lowered barriers to unionization through the Employee Free Choice Act and innovative approaches to the form and practice of unionism, especially among professional and technical workers, could more closely align demand and supply, leading to a substantial increase in the ranks of unionized workers in this country. This Labor Day, that’s something to think about.