

COMBATTING NEGATIVE VIEWS OF UNIONS: A DEFENSE OF LABOR STUDIES

by Victor G. Devinatz

While visiting a friend in a prosperous western suburb of Chicago in early September 1999, I decided to attend the city's Labor Day parade. As a labor relations professor, I was looking forward to this event, speculating on which unions would have the most impressive floats. It was a perfect day for viewing a parade—sunny and not too hot. Families with children of all ages were in good spirits and packed the streets waiting for the parade to commence. But, as the floats began to roll by, I thought to myself, "Where are the labor unions?" There were more than 100 floats in the parade, representing an array of village officials, community organizations, clubs, political candidates, high school sports teams and marching bands, ethnic organizations, and others. I did not see a labor union float until well past the halfway point in the parade. When the parade ended, I had counted only two floats of labor unions—a local union of plumbers and a local union of operating engineers—in the more than two-hour long parade.

"How could this be a Labor Day parade when there were only two

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floats representing labor unions?" I asked somewhat rhetorically. Has the Labor Day holiday merely been reduced to enjoying a three-day weekend that signals summer is coming to an end? Could it be that there were so few unions in this parade because it is a community composed largely of white-collar professionals? Is Labor Day no longer a meaningful holiday because it is only to be celebrated by traditional blue-collar workers who are becoming an ever smaller percentage of the U.S. labor force?

Young adults who have recently entered the labor force have a difficult time getting accurate information about labor unions and their activities.

With the significant decline in union density over the last several decades in the United States and with the history of Labor Day's origins not taught in our schools, it is not surprising that an increasing number of people will have little understanding of what Labor Day has meant to workers in the United States for more than a century.

These ruminations on the meaning of Labor Day led me to think about broader questions with respect to how labor unions and the labor movement are viewed by the public at large. With unions virtual-

ly ignored as a topic for study in elementary and secondary schools, and even in college, and a declining overall union density in the United States, citizens as a whole, but especially young adults who have recently entered or will enter the labor force have a difficult time getting accurate information about labor unions and their activities.

In terms of my own education, I do not remember any mention of the importance of labor unions or the contributions of the labor movement to the development of U.S. society as a whole. In my honors U.S. history class in a highly regarded public high school in suburban Chicago more than a quarter of a century ago, the textbook that we used had a picture of Samuel Gompers (the first president of the American Federation of Labor from 1886-1924) and approximately two paragraphs devoted to the role of the labor movement. In the two urban history classes that I took as an undergraduate in college, there was no discussion of the importance of labor unions to the development of the nation's cities.

Today, many of the students (usually second-semester juniors and seniors) in my labor relations classes at Illinois State University report that they cannot remember discussing the labor movement in high school, and before they actually get into the subject matter of the class, their perceptions of labor unions are almost always negative.

In past semesters, I've started out my labor relations course by asking

students to describe what they think are the public's perceptions of labor unions. (I phrase it this way so that students won't feel self-conscious about giving their own perceptions, although I believe that many of the perceptions that they give are actually their own beliefs.) The pattern of responses is remarkably consistent from semester to semester. Students report the following perceptions—or variations thereof:

1) Labor unions are adversarial in nature, that is they possess an us vs. them ideology; 2) unions are often willing to resort to violence to achieve their objectives; 3) unions are corrupt; 4) unions are too willing to go on strike; 5) unions coerce employees to become members; 6) unions were needed when they were first formed but now are no longer needed and have become too greedy; 7) companies that do not have unions will improve their conditions of employment to keep labor unions from organizing their employees; 8) unions have lost a lot of power in society; 9) union members are overpaid and lazy; 10) unions are unwilling to embrace change; 11) unions are not democratic ; and 12) workers who are members of labor unions are not very productive.

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If students are not learning about labor unions in schools, where do they get the information that leads to such negative views of unions? If all of my students were the sons and daughters of upper level managerial employees, one could argue they get their views from their families. But this is not the case. Most are from either a blue-collar or a white-collar working class background. It is possible that they get such views from their families, but it is more than likely that there is another factor that can explain the presence of these perceptions.

Specifically, I believe that the communications media—newspapers, television, and the movies—are instrumental in shaping people's views of labor unions.

According to Puette¹ in the last several decades, the communications media has portrayed a "pervasively unfavorable image of organized labor" while at the same time the media's impact and influence has grown "to exceed practically any other source of public opinion." For example, from 1950 to 1988, the average U.S. household increased its consumption of television from approximately four-and-a-half hours to a little over seven hours a day. Since people are spending so much time watching television, and with only 13.5 percent of the U.S. work force

represented by labor unions in the year 2001, more and more people are developing views of unions based on media coverage than on any type of actual experience or contact with either unions or union members.

Media coverage of unions is more likely to be negative than positive, biasing the public's views of unions. For example, the media is more likely to cover and sensationalize stories of union corruption and strike violence than to cover the successful negotiation of collective bargaining agreements between unions and employers. Because media coverage focuses on these infrequent yet dramatic events, the public gets the impression that unions are violent, elitist, socially unresponsive, undemocratic and/or crime-ridden.²

Schmidt³ examined media coverage of labor unions between 1946 and 1985 and found an increasing number of news stories devoted to strike activities. She notes that this emphasis on strike coverage occurred in spite of the fact that the actual number of strikes in the United States declined over this time period. Schmidt also discovered that this focus on strikes had the strongest negative impact on the opinions of individuals who lacked any type of ideological or group connection to unions.

And while the emphasis on portraying unions in a negative light has increased, total media coverage of labor unions has actually declined quite dramatically over the last few decades. From the 1940s through the 1960s, labor reporters were prominent staff members on major city newspapers throughout the United States. These reporters would talk to a wide range of sources including both labor union officials and academic labor relation experts. This type of in-depth coverage was inval-



able to the public as well as to other constituencies, including labor union officers and members, industrial relations practitioners, academics, and government officials. What was provided during these decades was a well-reasoned and balanced view of labor relations events.⁴

Today, most newspapers no longer have a reporter specifically covering the “labor” beat. When labor union coverage exists in a newspaper, it has often been merged into a more general and amorphous “workplace” beat—that can mean the coverage of virtually any topic at least tangentially related to the world of employment—appearing in the business section of the paper. The disappearance of the labor beat is probably due to two reasons—the increasing class bias of publishers and owners of the corporate media as well as the perception that labor unions are not institutions that significantly impact society anymore.⁵

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The portrayal of labor unions in movies has been no less problematic than their portrayal in

newspapers or on television. Scholars analyzing (mostly silent) films about immigrants, workers and unions made during the first three decades of the 20th century found that a majority of these films were sympathetic to the problems of working people although they did not view the organizing of unions or workers taking collective action as a class as a viable way to solve workers’ problems.⁶ Movies in the 1930s and 1940s still possessed sympathy for the trials and tribulations of working class people, although they expressed ambivalence or outright hostility towards labor union activity.⁷

Ross⁸ points out that in the post-war 1950s dominated by McCarthyism, economic prosperity, and the downplaying of class differences in U.S. society, filmmakers believed that workers deserved to be treated fairly but would not find this fairness in the corrupt-ridden unions that were portrayed in *On the Waterfront* (1954), *Inside Detroit* (1956) and *The Garment Jungle* (1957).

With the return of radical politics in the 1960s and 1970s, more films were made that were devoted to workers and working class life, although many popular films such as *Rocky* (1976), *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) and *Coal Miner’s Daughter* (1980) showed working class individuals confronting personal problems that were neither dealt with nor solved through collective action.⁹ This shift in film towards portraying working class individualism, as opposed to working class collectivism, is consis-

tent with the shift in the focus of newspapers deemphasizing labor union coverage and a move towards covering individual workplace issues.

There were a few explicitly pro-union films made in the 1970s and 1980s, such as *Norma Rae* (1979), *Reds* (1981), and *Matewan* (1987), as well as several pro-union documentaries, but films on labor unions in the 1970s through 1990s still emphasized union corruption and ties to organized crime [*Blue Collar* (1978), *F.I.S.T.* (1978) and *Hoffa* (1992)].¹⁰

According to Ross:¹¹

'Workers and their organizations are rarely depicted as rational bodies that seek a better standard of living for all wage earners.'

After nearly one hundred years of largely negative cinematic images, is it any wonder that few Americans—at least according to various public opinion polls of the past several decades—want to think of themselves as working class? Ask any group of students or voters what is the first thing that comes to mind when they hear the words “union,” “union leader,” “working class,” or “strike.” In all probability, the answer will not be positive. Indeed, who would want to think of themselves as a worker or join

a union when blue-collar wage earners are continually presented on film and television “as sappy, dopey, or foolish, and the labor movement is often portrayed as primarily involved with gangsters, cut-throats, thieves and bomb-throwers.” Workers and their organizations are rarely depicted as rational bodies that seek a better standard of living for all wage earners.

Since the media doesn't provide unbiased coverage of labor unions and because fewer people and their families get information about unions from the unions themselves, it becomes increasingly necessary that our colleges and universities provide education about the labor movement. In our schools, we teach about the importance of democracy to the U.S. political system, and we teach about the separation of powers between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government providing a check and balance system for an effective functioning political democracy. Virtually all college and university students will be entering the labor force (and many are already in the labor force) after they have completed their studies, so we should be teaching them the importance of attempting to achieve democracy not only in the political arena but in the workplace as well. Specifically, we should teach our students about the benefits that labor unions have provided—and continue to provide—to both unionized and nonunion workers and to society as a whole by promot-

ing economic democracy and a check and balance system with respect to employer power.

For example, at Illinois State University, there is a requirement that students pass an examination on the U.S. Constitution before they can receive their undergraduate degrees. Undoubtedly, the purpose of this requirement is to provide students with at least a basic knowledge of the the U.S. political system so they can be informed citizens when they engage in the political process. In a similar vein, if our students are to become citizens who make informed democratic decisions concerning their working lives, it is important to provide them with basic information about labor unions.

Within the United States, labor unions have demonstrated the capacity for promoting democracy both in the workplace and in society at large. In the workplace, management and employees often have

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conflicting interests over issues that arise from the employment relationship. Union representation provides employees with the capacity to participate meaningfully in the decision-making process, independent of the organization's management. Outside of the workplace, labor unions help to promote democracy by providing political representation for workers. For example, labor unions have the resources to support and campaign for candidates when they run for political office; they can educate workers concerning important political issues; they can organize "get out the vote" efforts, and they can both lobby and make monetary contributions to legislators.

With respect to passing legislation directly related to the labor unions' agenda, evidence indicates that unions have been most successful in helping to enact legislation that is beneficial to all workers, not only to unionized workers,¹² This finding reinforces one conclusion of a recent book by Lichtenstein,¹³ that the political and societal roles adopted by labor unions are important for promoting healthy democratic societies.

What topics should be covered in a required college/university labor studies course? At a minimum, I think that it is important to teach at least brief sections on U.S. labor history, labor legislation, and the collective bargaining process. In the remainder of this article, I hope to provide a general outline of what I think are the major points to stress in teaching about the nation's labor unions.

Teaching labor history should help students come to appreciate the reasons that led to the formation of craft unions and the American Federation of Labor (AFL) in the 19th century and to the formation of the industrial unions and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in the 20th century. Besides teaching students about these two trade union federations, there should be a discussion of major labor leaders—Samuel Gompers, Eugene Debs, “Big Bill” Haywood of the Western Federation of

Miners and the Industrial Workers of the World, John L. Lewis, Walter Reuther, and Sidney Hillman—who were active in the 19th and 20th centuries and their ideologies.

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Major events in labor history include the U.S. labor movement's struggle for the eight-hour work day, the government's involvement in labor-management relations during World War I and World War II, the merger of the AFL and the CIO in 1955, and the dramatic increase in the unionization of public sector employ-

ees that took place from the 1960s through the 1980s.

It is also important to discuss how the labor movement has often been active in promoting social justice in the United States. The work of the United Farm Workers in the 1960s in organizing farm workers in the California grape and lettuce industries can be discussed as well as the Service Employees International Union's organizing of janitors throughout the 1990s as two examples of unions attempting to bring social and economic justice to immigrant workers in the United States.

In addition, the labor history section should include a discussion of current events relevant to both blue-collar unions and white-collar unions. Since the transition from a manufacturing-based economy to a service-based economy has been going on for several decades, more and more jobs in the 21st century are white-collar. Within this context, a major point that needs to be emphasized is that professionalism and unionism are quite compatible. Unions have organized employees in many professions including teaching, acting, writing, music and nursing and have successfully integrated a variety of professional issues into their collective bargaining agreements, including items such as professional standards and training and professional development.¹⁴ Discussion of the importance of unions to white-collar professional employees will disabuse students of the notion that unions are only relevant and helpful to blue collar workers, or lesser skilled white collar workers.

Students should also be taught about the role labor unions have played in helping to pass employment-related legislation that has benefited unionized workers and nonunion employees as well. This is an important point to stress because many students believe unions are no longer necessary because government regulation will protect employees. In addition, students believe unions are no longer needed because virtually all employers have become “enlightened” and have come to believe, in spite of contrary evidence, that treating employees well is a necessary business practice in the 21st century.

In addition to U.S. labor history, the basics of U.S. labor legislation need to be taught. In this section, the major rights granted to employees under the legal foundation of the U.S. labor relations system, the National Labor Relations Act (1935)—also known as the Wagner Act—need to be outlined. Students need to understand that virtually all private sector employees, with some notable exceptions, have the federally protected right to form unions of

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their own choosing and to negotiate collective bargaining agreements with their employers. The role of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) in enforcing these rights also needs to be discussed. Finally, the major limitations imposed on unions by the two major amendments to the Wagner Act, the Taft-Hartley Act (1947) and the Landrum-Griffin Act (1959) should be outlined in some detail.

The dynamics of the collective bargaining process is also important, especially since many students believe unions impose contract terms on employers and do not understand that collective bargaining is a bilateral process that involves the art of compromise between the two parties. Students should also learn about the role of third-party neutrals—mediators and arbitrators—in helping to achieve a solution if the two parties are having trouble negotiating an agreement on their own.

Even though the parties have both shared and different interests, students should learn that the collective bargaining process need not necessarily be adversarial. Mutual gains bargaining—also known as win-win bargaining or principled negotiation—can be presented as a possible alternative to traditional collective bargaining to be used on some or even all negotiable items in contract negotiations.

While discussing the collective bargaining process, it is also important to present the widely supported empirical finding that labor unions have

positive effects on productivity. These effects occur through a reduction in employee quit rates, an improvement in the morale and cooperation of employees as well as inducing management to adopt more efficient production methods in the workplace.¹⁵

Finally, students should learn about the mechanics of the grievance procedure and how it is an efficient, equitable and beneficial system for the two parties to use in resolving industrial disputes that result from alleged violations of the contract.

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The steps of a typical grievance procedure should be presented along with the final step, arbitration, that can be used if the union and the employer cannot successfully resolve the grievance on their own.

Besides outlining the basics of the grievance procedure, it also is important to note the primary purpose for the union's rigorous enforcement of the contract. Every bargaining unit member represented by a labor union (whether or not s/he is a

union member) deserves to be treated with a fair and equal hand. This means that union rules in the contract must be enforced so that arbitrary actions are not taken in regards to promotion, layoff, and recall of any employee who is a member of the bargaining unit.¹⁶

Besides presenting information on the importance of the grievance procedure in the administration of the contract, it also is important to mention that many employers and unions have developed and formalized successful labor-management cooperation programs. These programs can take a variety of forms including written suggestion programs, quality of work life committees, quality circles, self-managing work teams, and gainsharing programs. Although unions must remain vigilant while participating in these programs, if employers are sincerely committed to retaining and improving collective bargaining relationships with unions, then union participation in these cooperation programs can provide mutual benefits to both employers and unions.

A required course in labor studies is necessary in our colleges and universities because there is no other place in U.S. society that currently provides accurate and positive information concerning labor unionism. It is unthinkable to send college and university graduates out into the work world without the knowledge of how labor unions contribute to maintaining and furthering democracy in society.

My hope is that students will come to understand that unions are

democratic institutions that represent their members' wills and are essential for a healthy democratic society. As political institutions, they also are one of the few remaining vehicles in the United States that represent and provide a voice for the political and economic interests of lower-income and disadvantaged persons.

While the media has often focused on the negative and sensationalistic aspects of unionism, such as strikes and union corruption, it has not focused on the more routine and mundane aspects of grievance processing and collective bargaining occurring in thousands of workplaces throughout the nation. These two processes might not provide as dramatic and exciting a read in the media's eyes when compared to strike violence and union corruption, but they are, nevertheless, the lifeblood of the nation's labor movement which helps millions of American workers—blue-collar and white-collar—achieve economic

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democracy and job security, as well as dignity and respect in the workplace, every single day of their working lives. Such a story concerning U.S. labor unionism is one that deserves to be told to as wide an audience as possible. [nea](#)

ENDNOTES

- 1 Puette, William J, *Through Jaundiced Eyes: How the Media View Organized Labor*. (Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR Press, 1992), 3.
- 2 Derek C. Bok and John T. Dunlop, *Labor and the American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970); Albert J. Zack, "The Press Bias on Labor," *AFL-CIO American Federationist* 84, no.10 (1977): 1-7.
- 3 Diane E. Schmidt, "Public Opinion and Media Coverage of Labor Unions," *Journal of Labor Research* 14, no.2 (1993): 151-64.
- 4 John A. Grimes, "Are the Media Shortchanging Organized Labor?" *Monthly Labor Review* 110, no. 8 (1987): 53-4.
- 5 Jo-Ann Mort, "How the Media "Cover" Labor," *Dissent* 39 (Winter1992): 81-5.
- 6 Kay Sloan, *The Loud Silents: Origins of the Social Problem Film* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Kevin Brownlow, *Behind the Mask of Innocence: Sex, Violence, Prejudice, Crime: Films of Social Conscience in the Silent Era* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990).
- 7 Peter Stead, *Film and the Working Class: The Feature Film in British and American Society*. (London: Routledge, 1989).
- 8 Steven J. Ross, "American Workers, American Movies: Historiography and Methodology," *International Labor and Working-Class History* no.59, (Spring 2001): 81-105.

- ⁹ Peter Stead, *Film and the Working Class*.
- ¹⁰ Steven J. Ross, "American Workers: American Movies".
- ¹¹ Ibid, 98.
- ¹² Richard B. Freeman and James L. Medoff, *What Do Unions Do?* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1984).
- ¹³ Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).
- ¹⁴ David M. Rabban, "Is Unionism Compatible with Professionalism?" *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 45, no. 1 (1991): 97-112.
- ¹⁵ Freeman and Medoff, *What Do Unions Do?*
- ¹⁶ Ibid.

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