

Poverty Research Flash

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What Unions No Longer Do

Union membership declined from 24 percent of all workers in 1973 to 12 percent of workers in 2009. During that same time period, income inequality has increased and wages have stagnated or declined in real terms for a growing share of the American labor force. In his new book, *What Unions No Longer Do*, WCPC Affiliate and Associate Professor of Sociology Jake Rosenfeld makes the case that these two trends are linked, with declining union strength removing a once-powerful equalizing force in both the labor market and the civic sphere.

Rosenfeld argues that unions played a significant role in helping keep inequality in check during the middle decades of the twentieth century through their attempts to articulate and promote “fair” working conditions, their political influence, and their ability to influence wages and benefits through their bargaining clout. In addition to their general impact on employment conditions for non-managerial workers, Rosenfeld further argues that unions once provided opportunities for upward mobility as well as a means of incorporation into civic life for various disadvantaged populations, including new immigrants, low-skilled, and minority workers. In recent years, Rosenfeld shows that unions have largely lost their ability to protect these groups from an increasingly competitive employment landscape or to help promote their participation in civic life.

Rosenfeld investigates the reasons for the decline of union influence and its consequences using a variety of data sources, including international patterns of unionization, wage data, newly available data on strike patterns, and data on voting patterns. Among the factors contributing to labor’s decline, Rosenfeld cites political shifts, increasing global competition, technological innovation, changes in collective bargaining regulations, and changes in the labor market, as well as labor leaders’ complacency.

As Rosenfeld shows, it is in the private sector that unions were able to exert their largest influence on members’ wages and benefits, and it is in that sector where union membership has declined the most, from roughly 35 percent of all private-sector workers in the early 1950s to around 5 percent today. During the post-World War II decades, private sector workers who were not unionized benefitted from unions’ gains as employers competed with unionized workplaces to attract and retain workers. Rosenfeld’s analyses show that private sector unions’ influence on non-union workers’ wages has diminished greatly, although they have been able to maintain wage premiums for their shrinking membership. In the public sector, unions remain relatively strong in terms of numbers. However, Rosenfeld notes that public sector unions have been less able to influence employment conditions for other workers and that public sector unions are now subject to political threats.

Rosenfeld suggests that the loss of union influence has been particularly devastating for the economic and civic prospects of certain populations of disadvantaged workers. For example, the opening up of well-paying unionized jobs provided new opportunities for African American women and an avenue toward the middle class. Unfortunately, African American women began entering unionized employment in large numbers just as unionized employment began to decline. Similarly, unionized jobs in the private sector historically provided good wages and job security for new immigrants with low-skills, helping them gain a foothold in the US. The loss of these jobs removes an important avenue of incorporation and economic stability for recent low-skilled immigrants.

Given shifts in the labor market, the political sphere, and the regulatory environment, Rosenfeld is not optimistic about a revival of the labor movement. Regardless of future trends in labor’s strength, Rosenfeld’s findings could help promote a broader discussion about the relative bargaining strength of workers and employers; the role of government regulation and policies in that process; and the implications of that balance of power for patterns of inequality and opportunity.

Highlighting New Poverty Research

by Jake Rosenfeld

Rosenfeld, Jake. 2014.
What Unions No Longer Do.
Cambridge, MA: Harvard
University Press.

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