

Union Members' Attitudes Toward Their Unions' Performance

By Joseph G. Lehman

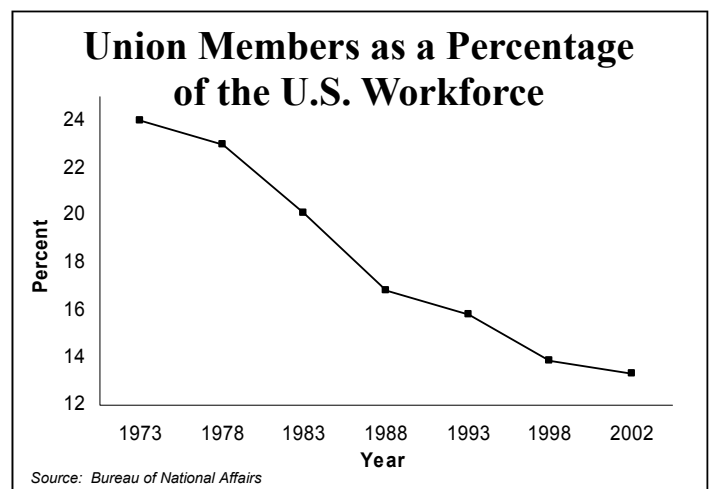
Introduction

The annual tradition of Labor Day news stories this year will be heavily infused with presidential politics. It is indeed important to know how labor union officials will spend their significant resources to influence election outcomes. But the future viability of unions as a political force may be revealed by today's attitudes of union members toward their unions.

This summer Zogby International and the Mackinac Center for Public Policy undertook a nationwide survey of union members to determine their views of their unions' performance. We asked union members about union effectiveness, union responsibilities, union political spending, ways for workers to create a union and how unions should treat workers.

The survey results illuminate discussion of one long-term trend and one current legal issue. Overall union membership has declined significantly in the United States since the 1970s,¹ even in Michigan. Worker attitudes toward their own unions may partly explain the lessening appeal of unions.

Partly in response to their declining membership, union officials have embarked on a new organizing tactic that is now the subject of a legal challenge. The new tactic, called "card check" and "neutrality agreement," involves union and company officials agreeing to bypass the normal government-supervised secret-ballot election that allows workers to determine whether a union will represent the employees. The tactic is favored by unions because it is a less costly and more successful means of organizing workplaces.² In 2005, the National Labor



Relations Board is expected to decide if workers will be allowed to challenge the existence of unions created using the tactic.³

Former NLRB member John Raudabaugh, a Detroit attorney, was reported by the Detroit Free Press as saying the NLRB's card-check decision is the most important issue in American labor law in the last 10 years. Independent of the NLRB decision, worker attitudes toward their unions in general and the card-check tactic in particular will influence unions' success in adding to their ranks and political strength.

Summary of Survey Findings

Significant findings include the following:

- a slight majority (51 percent) believe their union is doing what is required to stay strong and healthy; 44 percent believe their union is on the decline;
- a plurality (42 percent) hold about the same view (neither more nor less favorable) of their

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union as they did when they first became members;

- a large majority (73 percent) believe the most important responsibility of their union is bargaining for better compensation and workplace conditions;
- a plurality (42 percent) believe their union's spending is best described as spending to achieve better compensation and workplace conditions;
- pluralities believe their union spends the right amount on job benefits and politics (47 percent and 42 percent, respectively); but a third (34 percent) believe their union spends too much on politics.
- majorities (ranging from 53 percent to 84 percent) prefer a secret-ballot process as the way for workers to decide whether to organize a union in their workplace;
- a strong majority (66 percent) think it should be illegal for a union and a company to agree in advance to bypass the secret-ballot union election when organizing a workplace;
- a strong majority of workers (62 percent) believe that a union should have the support of at least two-thirds of workers before all the workers are represented by a union;
- a strong majority (63 percent) believe it is unfair to fire a worker who declines to pay dues to, or support, a union.

Survey Methodology

Zogby International conducted interviews of 703 union members chosen at random from a Zogby database of self-identified union households nationwide. All calls were made from Zogby International headquarters in Utica, N.Y., from June 25 through June 28, 2004. The margin of error is ± 3.8 percentage points. Slight weights were applied to age, race and gender to more accurately reflect the sample population.

Complete Survey Questions and Results

The following is the precise order and wording of the 20 questions asked of union members and their responses.

1. For how long have you been a member of a labor union?

Less than 5 years	17%
5 – 9 years	24
10 – 14 years	15
15 – 19 years	11
20 years or more	33

2. In what industry do you work?

Education	32%
Government	21
Manufacturing	11
Construction	11
Services	7
Transportation	6
Energy	3
Wholesale and/or retail trade	2
Telecommunications	2
Mining	1
Janitorial/Custodial Services	1
Textile/Laundry	--
*Other	3

*Other responses: Arts/Entertainment (19); Newspaper/Publishing (7); Attorney; Horse racing; Office manager (*number in parentheses denotes frequency of similar response*).

3. Was the union to which you belong organized before or after your current employer first hired you?

The union I belong to was organized before I was hired	93%
The union I belong to was organized after I was hired	7

4. Compared to when you first joined the union, how have your opinions changed towards your union and its leaders in general — are you now much more favorable, somewhat more favorable, somewhat less favorable, or much less favorable toward the union, or have your opinions remained about the same?

Much more favorable	20%	
Somewhat more favorable	12	(More favorable: 32%)
Somewhat less favorable	10	
Much less favorable	15	(Less favorable: 25%)
About the same	42	

5 – 7. As a union member, which of the following responsibilities do you consider to be ...

- **the most important for a labor union?**
- **second-most important for labor unions?**
- **third-most important for labor unions?**

Table 1. Responsibilities of a Labor Union
(ranked by percent saying most important)

	% Most important	% Second-most important	% Third-most important
Bargaining for better wages, benefits and working conditions for its members	73	15	5
Improving job security	10	34	18
Protecting against internal union corruption	3	8	19
Helping companies be more competitive	3	5	8
Improving the public image of labor unions	2	9	16
Engaging in political activities	2	11	10
Protecting the secret-ballot election process for all workers in union membership decisions	1	4	7
Increasing union membership	1	9	11
*Other	2	2	2
Not sure	2	2	6

*Other (Most): Retirement benefits (2); Supporting its members (2); Collective bargaining; Company safety; Get more people to vote; Going back to representation we had before; Health benefits; Helping to obtain more employment; Protecting us from being sued; Serving as an advocate for the union member; Educating younger members (number in parentheses denotes frequency of similar response).

*Other (Second-most): Benefits (2); Job security (2); Representation (2); Retirement benefits (2); Being honest with the members; Disability insurance; Health care; Improving education of children; Making more power for the workers; Organized labor; Protecting peoples' rights; Timely contracts (number in parentheses denotes frequency of similar response).

*Other (Third-most): Fight for union member rights (2); Better health care; Explanation of rights; How the board works with their union members to improve their situation in life; Job security; Keeping educated and informed and strong membership; Making sure elections are clean; Organized labor; Outsourcing our companies to other countries; Policing their own members; Protecting members from discrimination; Providing mutual aid and comfort; Staying out of politics; Wages; Working conditions (number in parentheses denotes frequency of similar response).

8. When you think of how your union dues are spent by your union, which of the following best describes how those dollars are spent?

My dues are mostly spent on helping workers get better pay, benefits and working conditions	42%
My dues are mostly spent to pay big salaries and perks to people in the union bureaucracy	22
My dues are mostly spent to support political parties or candidates	12
My dues are mostly spent on something else	10
I don't know how my union spends my dues	10
Not sure	4

9 – 10. Do you think your union spends too much, too little, or about the right amount of your dues money ...

- **on direct benefits to you and your family, like efforts to secure better wages, benefits and working conditions?**
- **on things like supporting political candidates and helping them get elected?**

Table 2. Spending Dues on Benefits and Politics

	Too much	Too little	Right amount	Not sure
On direct benefits to you and your family, like efforts to secure better wages, benefits and working conditions	4	43	47	6
On things like supporting political candidates and helping them get elected	34	11	42	14

11. Do you feel your union is doing the things it needs to do to make sure the union is strong and healthy for many more years, or do you feel your union is on the decline?

Doing what it needs to make sure it is strong and healthy	51%
On the decline	44
Neither/Not sure	6

12. Do you believe workers should have the right or should not have the right to vote on whether they wish to belong to a union?

Should have the right	84%
Should not have the right	11
Not sure	5

13. I'm going to describe two ways that workers might be asked to decide if they want to become part of a union and ask you which of the two ways is most fair. In the first way, a union organizer would ask workers to sign their name on a card if they wanted to be part of a union. The worker would sign his or her name on the card if he or she wanted a union, or the worker would tell the union organizer he or she would not sign the card if he or she did not want a union. In the second way, the government would hold an election in the workplace where every worker would get to vote by secret ballot whether he or she wanted a union. Which way is more fair?

Table 3. Choosing the Fairest Way to Decide on a Union

	%
The first way, which has union organizers ask workers to sign their name on a card if they want a union, or refuse to sign the card if they don't want a union	41
The second way, which has the government hold a secret-ballot election and keep the workers' decisions private	53
Neither/Not sure	5

14. Currently, the government is responsible for holding secret-ballot elections for workers who are deciding whether to form a union, and for making sure workers can cast their votes in a fair and impartial manner. Do you agree or disagree that the current secret-ballot process is fair?

Agree	71%
Disagree	13
Not sure	16

15. Do you agree or disagree that stronger laws are needed to protect the existing secret-ballot election process and to make sure workers can make their decisions about union membership in private, without the union, their employer or anyone else knowing how they vote?

Agree	63%
Disagree	24
Not sure	14

16. Which of the following do you feel should oversee secret-ballot elections for union membership? (The options were rotated in the interview and appear in rank order below.)

Oversight should be given to other outside parties	35%
Oversight should be given to individual unions	27
Oversight should stay with the government	24
Oversight should be given to individual companies	6
Neither/Not sure	8

17. Should Congress keep the existing secret-ballot election process for union membership, or should Congress replace it with another process that is less private?

Keep the existing process	78%
Replace it with one less private	11
Not sure	11

18. Which of the following percentages of workers do you feel should have to vote for a union before that union represents all the workers?

At least one-third of the workers	9%
At least half the workers	27
At least two-thirds of the workers	51
All of the workers	11
Not sure	2

19. Some companies and union organizers want to make a special agreement to unionize the workers if at least half of the workers sign their names on cards saying they want a union, rather than letting all the workers vote in a secret-ballot election overseen by the government. Do you agree or disagree that it should be legal for a company and union organizers to make this special agreement to bypass the normal secret-ballot process to determine whether to unionize the workers?

Agree	26%
Disagree	66
Not sure	8

20. Do think it is fair or unfair for a worker to lose their job if he or she refuses to pay dues to, or support, a union?

Fair	32%
Unfair	63
Not sure	5

Note: These survey results were first made available to the public by the Mackinac Center on July 20, 2004 in a news release detailing union members' attitudes toward the card-check and secret-ballot election processes.⁴

Conclusion and Recommendations

Policymakers and union and company officials can learn from this survey. The survey findings suggest that union members support many of their unions' goals, but confidence in long-term union viability and some union spending is not high.

Strong majorities do not support some current practices of unions and companies. Strong majorities do not want to lose their right to vote on union organization in a secret-ballot election, and they do not support the legality of companies and unions agreeing in advance to bypass these elections.

Strong majorities of union members believe that a union should obtain the support of two-thirds or more of workers before that union is allowed to represent all the workers. (The current level of support required by law is a simple majority.) Strong majorities also believe it is unfair for a worker to lose his or her job for refusing to pay dues to, or support, a union, but most collective bargaining agreements require just that.

The effect of union practices remaining out of step with the desires of their members is hard to predict, but it would seem very unlikely to help reverse declining union membership. To retain the support of union members, union and company officials and state and federal policymakers would be well advised to recognize the strong role fairness seems to play in shaping union members' views. This suggests crafting practices and policies that guarantee workers' ability to vote on union representation and respect the individual choices of workers to support a union or not.

Endnotes

¹ "Decline in Union Membership Part of Long-Term Trend, Analyst Says," Mackinac Center for Public Policy news release, Apr. 30, 2003. www.mackinac.org/5368

² "Let Cintas Workers Make Up Their Own Minds," Paul Kersey, *Viewpoint on Public Issues*, Jan. 6, 2004, www.mackinac.org/6054, and "Union Agreement Threatens West Michigan," *Viewpoint on Public Issues*, Jan. 6, 2004, www.mackinac.org/4944

³ "NLRB may deal UAW a blow by blocking card-check agreements," *Detroit Free Press*, Jun. 8, 2004, www.freep.com/news/latestnews/pm20179_20040608.htm

⁴ "National Survey Suggests Union Workers at Odds with Union Officials Over Organizing Tactic," Mackinac Center for Public Policy news release, Jul. 20, 2004, www.mackinac.org/6706

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