

SHRM Research

Workplace Visions explores developments in society, economics, science and technology, politics and government, and the law to stimulate thought and discussion on new issues and trends affecting the human resource profession. Material for the newsletter is gathered through contacting experts in the field and conducting extensive literature reviews.

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HR: Leading People,
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The Future of Unions

The recent schism in the AFL-CIO, the coalition of U. S. unions created in 1955 when the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations merged, has brought about a renewed interest in the future of unions. For some, the split was seen as another step in the slow decline of union membership and influence, while others viewed the development of a new coalition, Change to Win, made up of seven unions and representing around 6 million workers, as an important step in the revitalization of unions in the United States. The aftermath of the union split is likely to be significant, but it is not the only factor that may influence the future of unions. For organizations operating in a global economy, some of the most important union developments may occur overseas, and the dynamics of a global economy where competition for jobs is fierce may also influence the types of workers unions target for recruitment, the formation of union alliances—both within and across nations—and the types of workers who decide to join unions.

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Union Development, Union Decline

Historical factors have played an important role in both the growth and decline of unions. These issues continue to influence the views of union leaders and, in some cases, have led to major differences in union strategies.

The U.S. Union Split

The different views on the best way to deal with changing global and economic realities may have been the central cause of the recent fracture in the U.S. labor movement. The lead-up to the split and the main areas of disagreement may give an indication of the changes that can be expected in the immediate aftermath of the schism.

Recruiting and Organizing

Two of the foremost areas likely to be affected by the split are recruiting and organizing. Unions may put much more emphasis on recruitment efforts to increase their bargaining power and to build up their respective coalitions.

Unions in a Global Economy

Labor leaders are also putting more emphasis on the role of the global economy in shaping union strategies and alliances. This may lead to new tactics, such as global campaigns targeting specific companies, and may also strengthen the role of global labor bodies. Labor issues, particularly labor disputes, may be especially significant for multinational companies when they occur in key offshoring destination countries such as India and China.

Political Implications

The unions departing from the AFL-CIO have often emphasized recruiting and organizing over political campaign spending. Therefore, the split may have ongoing political implications. The new prominence of global issues in union efforts may also lead to new alliances between unions and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and campaigning bodies.

Union development, union decline

The National Labor Relations Act of 1935 gave most U.S. workers the right to join or form unions as a way for employees to bargain with employers over pay and working conditions. Union membership in the United States rose steadily over the following years but has declined in the last few decades. The AFL-CIO divide—largely a result of disagreements over the causes of this decline and what to do about it—marks a historic time for labor unions in the United States. Though there is disagreement over what direction unions will take in the future, there is somewhat more agreement both within labor leadership and among outside observers on what factors are likely to be most influenced by the split in the short term: union organizing, new member recruitment tactics and a potentially more focused approach to targeting specific companies. More long-term issues, such as the impact on political alliances, international activities and the changing demographics of union members, are less clear.

Part of the reason why there is disagreement among labor leaders over the best way for unions to move forward may be because there is still no solid consensus on why unions have declined in the United States so dramatically over the past 40 years. Critics of unions argue that they have made it more difficult to compete globally, are too politically entrenched and have created needless conflict between workers and employers that has led to declines in production and competitiveness—thus reducing the number of U.S. jobs that are most likely to be unionized. The changing nature of work and the development of employment legislation that protects workers are also often cited as key reasons why unions have declined—these developments may have led more employees to decide that joining a union was no longer necessary.

Understanding the decline in unions within the United States is made more complicated when considering that trends in union membership in many other countries have been very different. Some labor analysts argue that social and political factors play the most significant role in determining levels of union membership within particular countries. Other labor analysts focus more on the importance of economic trends, citing the growth in international competition from low-wage countries, especially in the manufacturing sector, as the main reason for the decline of manufacturing jobs, the traditional base for union recruitment. Labor analysts emphasizing the importance of economic factors in determining levels of union membership argue that countries where labor union membership remains high are simply responding more slowly than the United States to the new global economic landscape due to their more rigid employment structures.

These two views lead to different scenarios for the development

or decline of unions in the United States and in nations where union membership is still relatively high. Those emphasizing the importance of social and political factors argue that union membership in countries where the underlying political and social infrastructure places a strong emphasis on collective versus individual rights and responsibilities is unlikely to shift dramatically as a result of economic factors—or only if economic imperatives are accompanied by major shifts in the political and social climate. On the other hand, those emphasizing economic conditions as the major force behind the growth of unions are more likely to argue that the underlying social and political environment in countries with high union density rates (that is, the proportion of employees who belong to unions) will eventually adjust to the new economic realities with resulting changes in unionization.

This argument is likely to continue as we move forward into a more globalized, integrated world economy because it will help explain how unions and labor laws in different countries will respond to broader economic changes. Not only will companies need to understand the legal and employment implications of different systems underlying the union infrastructure in nations where they operate, but they must also understand that the factors that are likely to influence the way these unions actually operate may also be very different—in some nations unions may take on a political role that extends far beyond the employment realm, while in others the role of unions may be limited to a very small sphere of influence.

Another important factor that labor analysts emphasize is that the rise and fall of unions seem to coincide with major events such as war and prolonged periods of unemployment. Thus, the United States saw a major increase in unions and union membership after both World War I and World War II and during the final years of the Great Depression. This is an important factor to bear in mind for companies investing in international regions—either through establishing their own operations or via their supply chains—where political instability or widespread poverty continue to be significant challenges. In the United States, some labor analysts believe that only the convergence of a number of major historical and economic events would be enough to boost union density rates significantly, and even in this case, they argue, the numbers would eventually begin to decline once again. Clearly, U.S. union leaders on both sides of the schism disagree with this assessment and believe that the decline in unions in the United States can be reversed. Where they differ is in their strategies for bringing this reversal about.

The U.S. union split

The Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the Teamsters, UNITE HERE and the United Food and Commercial Workers are

now disaffiliated from the national AFL-CIO. The withdrawal of the unions that made up nearly a third of the AFL-CIO's membership and budget has focused a great deal of attention on the differences within the labor movement. Regardless of the reasons behind the division, the repercussions for labor are likely to be significant.

What are these changes likely to be? The top priorities of the Change to Win coalition, which is now the umbrella organization for those unions that withdrew from the AFL-CIO, give a good indication of some of the main changes that are likely to emerge in the aftermath of the split. These priorities are listed in their proposal as follows:

“Make it our first priority to help millions more workers form unions so we can build a strong movement for rewarding work in America; unite the strength of everyone who works in the same industry so we can negotiate with today's huge global corporations for everyone's benefit; reflect the diversity and commitment to change of today's workforce; build a growing, independent voice for working people in politics based on economic issues, not party; modernize the strategies, structure and priorities of the AFL-CIO to make these changes possible. “

With the exception of the last priority, which has already been and will continue to be influenced by the union divide itself, each of these priorities has the potential to represent a major shift in union strategy from the past decades and could have a profound impact on unions in the decades ahead.

Recruiting and organizing

The areas most likely to be influenced by the split are the recruiting and organizing efforts of unions. The SEIU, whose leadership was among the most vocal in criticizing the AFL-CIO, is the largest and fastest growing union in North America. Its membership has grown from 625,000 in 1980 to more than 1.8 million in 2005. Much of this is likely due to the growth in the number of service-sector jobs, many of these in the public sector, which is generally considered much easier to enroll than the private sector—in 2004, 36.4% of public-sector workers belonged to a union, whereas only 7.9% of private-sector employees were union members. However, the SEIU itself credits aggressive organizing as the main reason for its growth in membership.

Organizing and union structure

Overall, the new coalition is likely to focus attention on organizing activity at the local, national and, in some cases, even international levels. This may put some pressure on the AFL-CIO to follow suit, so an overall increase in organizing activity may be expected. What is not yet clear is if the schism between the two groups will weaken some of these initiatives. Shortly after the split, the AFL-CIO

announced that it would allow locals of disaffiliated unions to apply to be part of the central labor council or state federation through “Solidarity Charters.” This represents a major shift in policy as up until now unions that left the national federation also left the AFL-CIO at the local level. The new proposals appear to be aimed at enabling local unions to work together in cities and states, regardless of which of the national coalitions they are affiliated with. However, some observers believe that animosity between labor groups could make this kind of cooperation difficult and is likely to further erode unions' bargaining power. Conversely, greater competition between unions for membership could potentially increase union activities overall and, by increasing membership, also increase unions' bargaining power.

Another potential outcome is a shift to a more centralized model of organization. This model is one that the SEIU has used for several years, and SEIU leaders credit this change as an important factor in the union's growth. However, many local union members and leaders are opposed to the centralized model. “Staffing up” with nonunion members is a key component of the centralized model. There is disagreement over whether this has created greater consistency and strength in campaigns or if it has alienated rank-and-file members. This debate appears likely to be ongoing, so for some unions a shift to the centralized model may be more difficult than anticipated.

Demographics

The types of workers that unions target for membership is likely to adjust to ongoing changes in the workforce. This will probably occur in two main ways. First, the general demographic changes that are leading to a more diverse workforce are likely to lead unions to focus more and more on recruiting women and ethnic and cultural minorities. Secondly, the decline in the types of manufacturing and heavy industrial jobs that characterized the work of the typical union member of the past is giving way to jobs in the service sector, a change that has already influenced union strategies and will continue to do so. A shift to more aggressive organizing tactics that closely target key worker demographic groups such as women, young people and racial or ethnic minorities and job types such as service workers, knowledge workers and temporary workers may therefore be one of the main outcomes of the U.S. union split.

According to a Zogby International poll, demographic factors appeared to have an important impact on whether or not someone would join a union. For example, men were more likely than women to be against unions in their workplace, and single individuals were more likely than married individuals to be in favor of unionizing. Though union membership among young

people continued to decline between 2003 and 2004, other polls have found that young people are more likely than older people to support unions. These findings go against the idea that women and young people are not receptive to unionization. It is possible, therefore, that unionization efforts have not been able to connect with these target groups for reasons other than any inherent resistance to unionization within these demographics.

Traditionally women, immigrants and other minority workers were viewed as difficult to recruit into unions. However, recent trends indicate that service-sector unions, in particular, have made recruitment of these groups a central part of their organizing and recruitment strategies. One of the most important ways that unions are likely to do this is to find out exactly what kinds of issues are most likely to galvanize individuals from specific demographic groups to join a union. For example, the AFL-CIO 2004 “Ask a Working Woman Survey” aimed to find out what working women’s main priorities were. Unsurprisingly, “finding and keeping a job with basic benefits in today’s economy” was the top concern of the 14,000 women who participated in the online survey. Almost half of the women who responded had either been out of work themselves or had a family member or close friend who had been out of work. Around 33% did not have access to affordable health insurance. The survey also found that women who had health insurance were working in industries that were losing jobs while those who said they did not have health insurance were most likely to be working in industries that were growing. The 2005 research on job satisfaction by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) also showed that benefits, especially health insurance, were the most important factor in determining job satisfaction for all workers. An ongoing decline in benefits such as health insurance and pensions could boost unions’ ability to organize and recruit, but only if workers view unionization as a way to ensure access to these benefits.

Another factor that unions may emphasize in their recruitment efforts aimed at women is work/life balance. Women rated work/life balance as the single most important job satisfaction factor in SHRM’s 2005 *Job Satisfaction Survey Report*. However, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), men are actually slightly more likely than women to have flexible schedules and an increasing number of women work evenings, nights or weekends on a regular basis. SHRM research on benefits (2005) found that, in spite of demand, there had actually been a slight decrease in some types of flexible working arrangements such as job sharing that women may seek out in order to balance work and personal responsibilities. As the costs of benefits, particularly health care, increase, employers looking to boost employee productivity as a way to offset these costs may be less likely to offer flexible working arrangements, and this

could have an ongoing impact on employee work/life balance. As a result, unions are likely to continue to focus on benefits, job flexibility and scheduling in their recruitment efforts aimed at women.

The changing demographics of workers in the fastest growing areas of the economy may also drive union recruitment efforts. A good example is the Latino population, which is the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, and makes up a growing proportion of service-sector employees. Unions are already targeting Latino workers in a number of ways. Many unions are providing translators for election ballots and union meetings and other services aimed at helping non-English speaking Latino workers participate more fully in union activities. These kinds of services and initiatives are likely to grow, not only for Spanish-speaking union members but for other members for whom English is not their first language. Especially in those segments of the economy where foreign-born workers make up a large proportion of the

Table 1 2004 Union Member Demographics

Gender	Percentage of Employees
Men	13.8%
Women	11.1%
Race	
Black	15.1%
White	12.2%
Asian	11.4%
Hispanic or Latino	10.1%
Age	
16 to 24	4.7%
25 to 34	10.6%
35 to 44	13.7%
45 to 54	17.0%
55 to 64	16.8%
65 and older	7.5%
Full-time/part-time	
Full-time workers	13.9%
Part-time workers	6.4%
Public sector/private sector	
Public sector	36.4%
Private sector	7.9%

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics

workforce, unions are likely to set aside extra resources for these types of services. And because unions are legally obliged to represent all members fairly, the availability of bilingual liaisons between non-English speaking members and their unions and other related services may be seen as a necessary way of guaranteeing that all union members are represented. At the same time, union leaders may find it increasingly difficult to bridge the language divide in some situations. This may be the case not only domestically as unions try to facilitate communication between U.S. and foreign-born members, but also in global efforts to create international labor alliances.

Another challenge for unions will be organizing the large undocumented workforce. While fear of deportation and, in some cases, the nature of the work being done will continue to make it difficult for unions to recruit undocumented workers, falling wages may make unionization more attractive to a growing number of workers. According to a study by the Pew Hispanic Center, Latinos are the only major group of workers who have experienced wage declines in both 2003 and 2004. Labor and immigration experts believe that the growing supply of immigrant workers is likely the main reason behind the drop and that new arrivals are the most likely to experience wage decline. The growing presence of undocumented workers in the U.S. workforce makes it likely that

unions will continue to take this population into account in their organizing and recruiting efforts, while lower wages among this population may make them more receptive to unions.

Location is another major demographic factor that unions are likely to continue to focus on, but unions may find it extremely difficult to organize and recruit in those states and regions where union density is currently low. Though union density varies widely depending on geographic location, within regions union density rates do not appear to have changed drastically over the past decade. States with the lowest union density rates tend to be located in the South, and of the four states that reported union membership rates below 5% in 2004, both North Carolina (2.7%) and South Carolina (3.0%) continued to record the lowest union membership rates as they have done each year since the data became available in 1995. The states with the highest union membership rates (over 20%) have also remained stable: New York, Hawaii, Michigan and Alaska have all had rates above 20% every year since 1995. Unions may attempt to step up their organizing efforts in states that currently have low union density by taking different approaches in rural and metropolitan areas, shifting resources to these areas and trying to develop strategic regional alliances.

Industries and work organization

Along with changing demographics that have caused unions to rethink their recruitment and organizing strategies, the changing nature of work itself has been perhaps the single biggest issue that has caused unions to reexamine the tactics they use to recruit workers. Disagreement over the implications of new ways of working and the growth of new industries may also have been the main factors behind the U.S. union split. The unions leaving the AFL-CIO were dominated by the service sector. According to some labor

Table 2		2004 Wage Differential by Union Membership
\$781	2004 median weekly salary, union employees	
\$612	2004 median weekly salary, nonunion employees	
<i>Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics</i>		

Table 3		Union Density by State*
Four U.S. States With Highest Union Density		
New York	25.3%	
Hawaii	23.7%	
Michigan	21.6%	
Alaska	20.1%	
Four U.S. States With Lowest Union Density		
North Carolina	2.7%	
South Carolina	3.0%	
Arkansas	4.8%	
Mississippi	4.8%	
<i>*Union density is the percentage of employed individuals who belong to a union. Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics</i>		

Table 4			Potential Targeted Occupations With Largest Expected Employment Growth Through 2012
Job	Current Employment (Millions)	Projected Growth*	
Nursing aide	1.3	25%	
Customer service	1.9	24%	
Food preparation	2.0	23%	
Janitorial	2.2	18%	
Waiter/waitress	2.1	18%	
Retail sales	4.1	15%	
Cashier	3.4	13%	
<i>*Projections of job growth from 2002 to 2012 Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics</i>			

experts, because many service-sector jobs are not unionized and wages in many of these types of jobs are often lower than those of the more established unionized sectors, the unions made up of members in the service sector are more likely to be focused on recruitment in order to increase bargaining power and gain access to the kinds of benefits that members of the more established unions already have.

Related to industrial changes is the growth in temporary work, which may play an increasingly significant role in union strategies. Not only are unions likely to target temporary workers as potential members, but the use of temporary replacement workers to offset the threat of strikes may become much more common and could act to reduce unions' bargaining power. This recently occurred when Northwest Airlines' mechanics union, American Mechanics Fraternal Association (AMFA), went on strike. Northwest used replacement mechanics, including some former workers at major airlines who were laid off after 9/11, to continue services. The outcome of the strike, which is still ongoing at the time of writing, could impact strategies of both unions and companies. More companies may decide to put together contingency plans using temporary replacement workers in the case of a strike and, in some cases, shift to the use of temporary contract workers on an ongoing basis. For unions, the incident may lead to more mergers and consolidations. One important factor in the Northwest mechanics strike was that other Northwest unions, including those representing pilots, flight attendants, ramp workers and ticket agents, all decided not to honor AMFA's picket lines. Some observers felt this may have been due to AMFA's "go-it-alone" strategy, which may work well for skilled workers in times when the economy and labor market are buoyant, but may be less successful when the job market is slack.

This leads to the next category of workers that unions are likely to increasingly target—skilled and knowledge workers. For those skilled workers who are already in unions, like the mechanics in the Northwest strike, a more challenging global economy may lead to the consolidation of smaller unions into larger unions as a way to leverage bargaining power. For some of the larger service-sector unions, such as the SEIU and the Teamsters, this strategy of growth is viewed as the best way to deal with the growth of multinational companies that have themselves increased their reach through an ongoing cycle of mergers and acquisitions. Though many rank-and-file members may disagree with this approach, preferring looser, more democratic management structures, a growing number of smaller unions made up mainly of skilled workers may decide that their bargaining power can only be increased by joining in with larger unions, even if these are dominated by low-skilled, low-wage workers. Unions will also continue to try to recruit white-collar knowledge workers. Historically, unions have been weak among professionals in fields like accounting, banking, finance and high-

tech, and most experts believe that it would take a major attitudinal shift among workers in these industries for unions to make inroads in these areas. However, some believe it might be possible if large numbers of knowledge workers are eventually faced with significant wage and benefit decreases or job loss due to global competition. Conversely, the threat of offshoring could inhibit this as workers willingly accept cuts in order to keep their jobs.

Unions in a global economy

Changing their tactics to adjust to this shift to a global economy is one of the main issues preoccupying the unions that left the AFL-CIO. There are two main strategies that appear to be emerging: first, targeting specific multinational companies for international campaigns; and second, putting more resources into organizing workers at either targeted companies or within specific industries across the globe. For example, the SEIU has placed global issues at the center of its "Uniting Our Strength to Win Big" campaign, in large part as a response to the offshoring trend. The union explains why global strength is such a major part of its overall strategy in the following way: "Huge global service-sector companies routinely cross national borders and industry lines as they search for places where they can shift operations to exploit workers with the lowest possible pay and benefits. To confront this challenge, SEIU will step up its mutual support alliances with unions in other nations, with the goal of uniting workers who do the same type of work around the world." The aim of building transnational union alliances has been a part of the debate within labor for some time, so it is not yet clear if these new developments will have any more of an impact than past efforts. However, the offshoring trend and the use of technology to bring together groups may encourage the development of international union alliances in a new way. In addition, the shift of investment and the establishment of operations in countries such as India, China and Eastern Europe may mean that union developments in these key offshoring destinations may have a global impact regardless of whether they are locally, nationally or internationally led.

Global union alliances and federations

In 2000 the Union Network Federation (UNI) was created with the intention of building an alliance that could represent workers across many countries. According to UNI, "when companies are local, unions can be local; when companies are national, unions must be national; when companies are global, unions must be global." Apart from UNI, there are several other global trade union bodies that could have some influence on the development of unions globally in the future. There are currently 10 Global Union Federations (GUFs), which are the international representatives of unions in specific industry sectors or occupational groups. The

International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) represents most national trade union centers or federations. Individual unions may belong to several GUFs, depending on the number of industries that belong to that union, and many relate to the ICFTU through their national trade union federation. While many of these global union bodies have been around for many years, their influence may grow if the impact of globalization leads to more union activity at the international level.

Targeting multinational corporations

Because the right to strike is not uniform across borders, UNI Global Union campaigns are instead limited to campaigns that focus on the image and reputation of the company in question. The development of global union alliances may therefore mean an increase in campaigns that target specific companies. These types of campaigns, usually aimed at multinationals, can include lawsuits, consumer boycotts and appeals to shareholders, community leaders and politicians. Based on current trends, the main targets for these types of actions in the near future could be multinational retailers and wholesalers. UNI has already used this tactic in campaigns targeting German and British retailers with operations around Europe. It recently announced a program to step up global organizing at Wal-Mart, focusing on new organizing initiatives in countries such as Korea, Russia and India.

Unionization in key offshoring destination countries

Multinational companies adding operations in major offshoring destinations may also be affected by national unionization trends in these countries. For example, Honda Motor recently incurred a loss of millions of dollars through lost output during a labor dispute at its unit in Gurgaon, India. India's business and political leaders were quick to label the dispute, in which some employees were injured in a confrontation with local police, as an isolated incident that had no bearing on the investment climate in India overall. But the incident served as a reminder that labor disputes in one of the world's top offshoring destination countries can have a fairly significant financial impact.

China has also recently experienced a grassroots movement to raise worker awareness of their legal rights. According to the Chinese Labor Bulletin, in 2004 alone around 3 million Chinese workers joined a total of 57,000 protests across the country. The use of technology to connect activists has played a major role in the growth of this movement, creating networks of training centers, legal aid clinics and other forms of employee support. Worker shortages in many parts of the country may strengthen this trend, particularly among workers in the manufacturing sector.

Increasingly, foreign investors will need to consider the impact

of labor issues in offshoring destination countries. In democratic countries such as India, labor disputes may more quickly lead to legal changes in employment law, while in countries such as China, a growing grassroots labor movement could have a much wider political impact.

Political implications

These and other global developments may be leading unions to rethink their traditional alliances. Not only may more U.S.-based unions begin working with international bodies such as UNI and other unions around the world, they may also get much more involved with NGOs working internationally to establish basic labor standards and to target specific companies and labor practices through protests, boycotts and other types of activism. Greater involvement in these types of initiatives may also play a role in unions' attempts to involve and recruit young people. By tapping into global causes that many students and other young people are already involved in, unions may attempt to create a bridge between these causes and the labor movement in general.

One alliance that some observers believe may weaken as a result of the union split is that between unions and the U.S. Democratic Party. Because one of the key priorities of the Change to Win coalition is to "build a growing, independent voice for working people in politics based on economic issues, not party," along with the coalition's emphasis on recruitment over political lobbying, some political observers believe that the traditional support of unions for the Democratic Party may wane. However, some union insiders predict that union donations to political campaigns will not change significantly.

Implications for HR professionals

The divisions within the U.S. labor movement could lead unions into many different directions in the years ahead. HR professionals will need to continue to keep up to date with changes in union tactics, alliances and recruiting methods, as changes over the coming years could be significant. Worker demographics, along with the growing importance of labor disputes and alliances across the globe, will all shape the interactions between unions and employers. The philosophical divides within the labor movement itself—between those who aim to reinvent unions as centralized organizations focusing on a limited number of employment issues but on the global scale and those who see unions as a broader social movement led by decentralized, local rank-and-file members—are also likely to continue to clash. No one is sure what the main outcomes will be over the long term, but for employers and HR professionals, understanding developments in unions will continue to be critical, even as the task grows more complex.

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