WHITE COLLAR UNIONS: THE FAILURE AND FUTURE OF THE AMERICAN LABOR MOVEMENT

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By

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ABSTRACT

Participation in labor unions has fallen to an all-time low among American workers. This decline has occurred over the same period of time that the American economy has shifted from industrial work characterized by blue collar labor to an economy of white collar workers primarily focused on providing services. Generally defined as salaried professionals, or educated workers performing semi-professional non-manual tasks, white collar workers have by and large not become members of labor unions. The lack of white collar unionization has contributed much to the declining role of labor unions in this country. Why have white collar workers resisted attempts at collective action? This thesis will explore the failures of white collar unionism efforts, and what that means for the future of the American labor movement.

This examination of the involvement of white collar workers in the American labor movement will begin with a survey of some of the critical events in the history of organized labor in America and how they impacted white collar workers. It will progress to an assessment of exceptionalism in American labor relations; what makes this country’s development of industrial relations unique from other nations. This will be achieved through a discussion of the industrial norms that underpin and influence employer and employee behavior and the mobilization biases that arise from these norms.
The specific case of white collar workers will then be examined, as it is the assertion of this thesis that their lack of participation in unions is playing a role in the decline of the labor movement in this country. This examination will look both at the specific nature of white collar work and how it relates to workers organizing, and also how white collar workers perceive unions. The influence of various forms of movement politics will also be looked at, particularly as they relate to white collar workers. Additionally, there will be an assessment of how structural changes in the American economy over the past several decades have impacted the unionization rates of white collar workers. Finally, all topics discussed will be applied to a critical thinking model that will result in an assessment of the immediate future of the American labor movement.
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INTRODUCTION

As the twentieth century came to a close and America took its first steps into the fourth century that would know it as a nation, much discussion took place about the changes that this middle-aged superpower had undergone. The end of the Cold War and the spread of globalization changed not only America’s perception of its place in the world, but also the economic forces that act upon it. An economy based firmly in industry and manufacturing was the engine that drove America to its pinnacle of world power and influence, but American industrialism has increasingly been replaced with a service-based economy. Nowhere is this change more evident than in the labor movement and the rates at which workers are unionizing. As of 2009, private sector union membership is down to 7.5% of the workforce,¹ compared to a peak of 35.7% in 1953.² As Table 0.1 demonstrates, the percentage of the workforce that belongs to a union has been in a steady decline since that peak.

Reasons for this decline are myriad and have been much debated by scholars. Some possibilities include missteps by labor leaders over the years, immutable economic forces, social developments, increased employer resistance to organizing efforts, changes in labor law and shifts in labor force composition.³ Making this decline even more puzzling is that union members on a whole earn higher wages and receive better health

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care and pensions than non-union members. Indeed, the decline in union membership has been accompanied by a steady decline in the weekly earnings of the average American worker.\(^4\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Membership Density</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1953</td>
<td>35.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>29.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>20.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Of the possible reasons for the decline in the American labor movement, the one this paper will focus on is composition of the labor force. As previously mentioned, the United States has spent the last half century transitioning from an industrial economy to a serviced-based economy. This has meant an increasing number of employment roles characterized as “white collar,” as opposed to the historically American “blue collar” workforce of an industrial manufacturing economy. C. Wright Mills characterized this new type of work in \textit{White Collar: The American Middle Class}, saying “[f]or in the great shift from manual skills to the art of ‘handling,’ selling and servicing people, personal or

even intimate traits of employees are drawn into the sphere of exchange and become commodities in the labor market." In other words, manual dexterity and strength – hallmarks of the industrial worker – are giving way to the skill of interacting with consumers, be it in a sales environment or in context of providing a service. Table 0.2 illustrates the shift in occupation within the American workforce.

### Table 0.2 Percentage of Workers in the United States By Occupation Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Blue Collar</th>
<th>White Collar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The shift in the nature of work and the workplace in the last half-century has been marked. Beginning at the end of the Second World War, the move away from manufacturing and production was further spurred along by the economic downturn at the beginning of the 1980s. Declines were seen worldwide in the agricultural and manufacturing industries, the very industries responsible for the emergence of trade unions and the labor movement. Meanwhile the service sector continued to grow,

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leading to a further erosion of the proportion of the workforce in the industries with a traditional propensity to unionize.\textsuperscript{6}

It seems, however, that the American labor movement was not prepared for this shift, as the increase in white collar workers has correlated so closely with the decline in union membership. Whatever the reasons may be, the fact is that non-manual workers are less likely to belong to a union than manual workers; and not just in the United States, but in industrial economies all over the globe. As of 1996, the rate of union membership in white collar professions was 11%, compared to 23% for blue collar professions.\textsuperscript{7} It stands to reason that if white collar workers are unionizing at lower rates during a time where opportunities for white collar work are increasing and opportunities for blue collar work are becoming more scarce, overall rates of union membership and density would decline. Why, though, do white collar workers seem disinterested in joining unions?

Possible reasons for this lack of engagement include negative impressions of unions, or the feeling that unions are of little benefit to white collar workers. It may be that the very nature of white collar work leads individuals to a sense of purpose within a company, making the very notion of joining a union an anathema. As will be shown in later chapters, white collar workers in the private sector think of themselves as being highly upwardly-mobile. In having one eye on the future of their career at all times, they likely will prove unwilling to take part in some form of collective action early in their


career. These workers aren’t necessarily thinking of their immediate well being; they are thinking of how a change in the balance of power between workers and management would impact them when themselves are eventually part of the management.

It should be noted that any examination of white collar workers and unions would be incomplete without a mention of public sector unions. Many public workers at federal, state and local levels are performing jobs that are certainly considered white collar work, and a rather large percentage of these workers are indeed unionized (36.4% as of 2006⁸). The single occupational group currently most associated with unions is public school teachers; they are, in fact, the most highly unionized group of professionals, and are certainly categorized as white collar workers.⁹ We are not, however, including white collar workers in public unions in this discussion; since they are largely isolated from market forces and competition, they have been able to ignore many of the pragmatic actions taken by white collar workers in the private sector, which is the focus of this thesis.


CHAPTER ONE
A SURVEY OF THE HISTORY OF LABOR RELATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES

In order to understand and examine the participation of white collar workers in American unionism, it is first necessary to have an understanding of how labor relations developed in the United States. It was through this development process, unique to this country, that many of the forces that would later influence white collar workers first began to manifest.

The first permanent union in the United States was formed in the 1790s by a group of shoemakers in Philadelphia. They were seeking better wages, better hours and better working conditions, and they were successful in their efforts to organize. The shoemakers, and other proto-unions, were distinguished by their focus on craft identity and the hyper-local nature of their actions. Unfortunately for the workforce at large, this early effort didn’t signal a national trend towards unionism; throughout the early 1800s, employers routinely used the courts to crush workers’ efforts to organize. It was typically the opinion of the courts that unions represented an illegal restriction of free trade. It wasn’t until 1842 and the Commonwealth v. Hunt decision that unions received the backing of the courts. This legal decision from the Massachusetts Supreme Court, in a case involving a Boston bootmakers’ union, reversed the existing view that unions were

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tantamount to conspiracy. The Hunt ruling effectively established unions as legal, so long as they behaved in a legal manner and used legal means to achieve their goals.

For the next several decades, unions grew and faded cyclically, yet with an increasingly national scope. The rise of national unions and national labor efforts reflected the changing nature of business in the United States. Industrialization and the growth of the railroads vastly expanded both the reach American corporations and the necessity for worker organization; the industrial environment was leading to ever more dangerous working conditions and abuse of worker wages and hours worked. Prior to the 1850s the majority of unionization efforts were centered on craft unions such as shoemakers, printers and carpenters; it wasn’t until the middle of the 19th century that there was growth in the efforts to organize in the manufacturing sector.

**Labor Strife and Violence**

The late 1800s was marked as a period of violence and unrest in American Labor relations, leading to the view of many scholars that the United States has had the “bloodiest and most violent” labor movement of all the world’s industrial nations. The Great Uprising of 1877 is remembered as the first true national strike, lasting 45 days in all. It began with dissatisfied railroad workers in Martinsburg, West Virginia and spread

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to cities throughout the Mid-Atlantic and Midwest like Baltimore, Philadelphia, St. Louis and Chicago. At first local militias and police were sent against the strikers, and as the brutality and intensity of the strike increased President Hayes sent in federal troops,\(^4\) which brought an end to the unrest. In 1886, the Haymarket Tragedy saw the death of nearly a dozen people including “seven policeman and an unknown number of civilians”\(^5\) at what had began as a peaceful protest in favor of the eight-hour workday. Ironically, the group most associated with Haymarket Tragedy, the Knights of Labor, was a national union that preached cooperation and sought to uplift the lives of its members through education, and the elevation of the social and moral life of the worker.\(^6\)

In the wake of the violence of the 1880’s and the downfall of the Knights of Labor following the Haymarket Tragedy, a new national union was formed: the American Federation of Labor (AFL). The AFL is a pivotal player in the history of American labor relations, as was its first president, Samuel Gompers. A member of the cigar makers union, Gompers sought to examine what was wrong with unions in America. He felt that the true role of unions was in collective bargaining, and the use of the power of the strike. The AFL was also different from previous national efforts in that it was a federation of unions rather than an individual union itself. The distinct unions that made up its membership remained organized according to their specific crafts. Due


to its focus on immediate improvements in basic working conditions, the AFL was the first large-scale example of business unionism in the United States. Moreover, the AFL was able to succeed where the Knights of Labor had failed; they overcame the grassroots orientation, weak organization and membership instability that had plagued many early American movements, including the Knights of Labor.\(^7\)

In the early twentieth century, American society was marked by increasing inequality, as one percent of households controlled nearly half the total wealth in the country. It is not surprising then, that this period saw the rise of the Industrial Workers of the World, the most significant American example of revolutionary unionism. As revolutionary unionism is based in Marxist thought, it stresses a class-based employment relationship conflict; the labor movement became, in the eyes of Marxists, an agent in the effort to overthrow capitalism.\(^8\) Indeed, Americans have generally showed a dislike of radicalism in their labor relations, and the experiment with this type of unionism would prove to be short-lived.

The Wagner Act and the Rise of the Labor Movement

The Great Depression and President Roosevelt’s New Deal brought the next significant event in the history of labor relations in America with the passage of the National Labor Relations Act (Wagner Act). The Wagner Act legalized the relationship

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between employers and employees by affirming the rights of workers, including the right to form, join and organize unions, and by establishing unfair labor practices on the part of employers. These unfair labor practices included infringing on any of the workers’ established rights, dominating or interfering with unions, and engaging in various forms of employment discrimination. To this day the Wagner Act is the cornerstone of private sector labor law in America. This legislation was based in the theories of the industrial relations school of thought, which hold that labor is more than a commodity; that there is an imbalance of power between management and labor; that workers and employers have a conflict of interest that must be resolved cooperatively and that employee voice has a critical role in the workplace. As a result of the Wagner Act, membership in labor unions spiked in the years following the passage of the legislation, with nearly 40% of the American workforce becoming unionized.

Around this period of time, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) formed. As a federation of industrial unions, it stood as a rival to the AFL’s federation of craft unions. The unions that were part of the CIO became the most significant force in the American labor movement, due in large part to their acceptance of workers regardless of their gender, race, or country of origin. These unions also became heavily centralized, with the control of their leadership becoming increasingly significant. This too was the period where the grassroots and community-based organizing efforts of the previous

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Business unionism had become the dominant model in U.S. industrial relations.

After the end of World War II, and with it the end of the price and wage controls that employers and unions had observed as part of the war effort, there was a marked increase in the amount of strikes in the labor force. Many felt that these strikes were the result of the Wagner Act having given labor an excessive amount of power, thus when a conservative-leaning Congress was installed following the 1946 elections, they promptly passed the Labor Management Relations Act of 1947, also known as the Taft-Hartley Act. This new legislation brought significant amendments to the Wagner Act, seeking to redress the perceived imbalance of power between management and labor. The Taft-Hartley Act added restrictions to union activities, detailed the rights held by employers and clarified the procedures by which disputes could be resolved.

**New Legislation and the Beginning of Labor’s Decline**

The years following the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act saw the zenith of the American labor movement. The unions themselves were still quite powerful, but membership peaked around 1953. In 1955, the AFL and the CIO merged, in part to stop the expenditure of resources stemming from the practice of raiding each other for members, but also in recognition of the need to unite against the growing hostility of the public towards unions. This hostility came from the perception that unions were corrupt organizations. Ultimately, this led to the passage of the Landrum-Griffin Act in 1959,

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which sought to clean up the unions by insisting on financial transparency and codifying a more democratic process for conducting union business.

By the 1970s the decline of the labor movement was clear. Labor leaders had struggled to find their place in the civil rights movement during the previous decade, as they were faced with a membership that had in many cases tolerated discrimination within their organizations. With the economy changing due to the effects of globalization, organized labor was beset on all sides. Their situation worsened further in the 1980s, with President Reagan firing the air traffic controllers union (PATCO) during their illegal\textsuperscript{12} strike and filling their jobs with replacement workers. Though they were public employees, it has been suggested by certain scholars that Reagan’s actions bolstered the attitudes of private sector employers looking to take a more adversarial stance towards their unionized employees.\textsuperscript{13}

\textbf{Labor in the Twenty-First Century}

As this perfunctory survey of the critical events in the history of American labor relations has shown, the pendulum has swung back and forth between management and labor in terms of who holds the power. However, though it would seem that the events of the late twentieth century favoring management would dictate that the balance of power again start to shift towards labor, the unsuccessful attempt to pass the Employee Free

\textsuperscript{12} Calling this strike illegal is not to be viewed as some sort of editorial comment. The PATCO members were part of the federal government, within the Federal Aviation Administration. As outlined by the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978, it is illegal for members of the government to strike.

\textsuperscript{13} Steven Greenhouse, \textit{The Big Squeeze: Tough Times for the American Worker} (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 81.
Choice Act (EFCA) in 2010 indicates otherwise. As Steven Greenhouse noted in an article in the *New York Times* on January 8, 2009, the EFCA was intended to make unionization easier because it “would give unions the right to win recognition at a workplace once a majority of employees sign cards saying they want a union.” This so-called “card check” process would eliminate the current system of unionization – an acrimonious two-month long fight between a company and union organizers, which many labor leaders claim has contributed to the decline of the labor movement. However, the bill never received the political support necessary to bring it to a vote in the Senate, which seems to indicate that management still holds significant power in the court of public opinion.
CHAPTER TWO

INSTITUTIONAL NORMS

Forces Arising from Founding Conditions

As noted in the previous chapter, the labor movement in the United States arose under a very specific set of founding conditions. These particular qualities of our labor movement, while each individually observable in the nascent labor movements of other industrial economies, were unique in that they arose in this particular combination in the United States. Remarkably, many of these conditions would not seem to be conducive to a healthy labor movement over the long run: possessive individualism, a respect for the sanctity of property and ownership rights, a strong tradition of self-help, and conservative mobilization biases are all impediments to robust unionism. In other words, these essentially American social forces are not generally likely to foster a labor force that is eager to organize. Our early labor movement was able to succeed in spite of these influences, due in a large part to the truly dire working conditions that existed in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. As the economy has evolved and moved away from industrialism, and workers – particularly new workers entering the workforce – are predominately white collar who don’t face such severe safety and wage challenges, the anti-union pressures intrinsic to our industrial relations are able to exert greater control.
The forces involved in forming these founding conditions set in place patterns of behavior that foster a strong anti-labor mobilization bias.¹ The existence of these biases means that as we have seen the surge in white collar workers over the past several decades, they have encountered a working environment that is fundamentally not disposed towards organized labor. The current generation of workers grew up in a society that subtly ingrains anti-mobilization biases. It stands to reason then that these forces have had a profound effect on determining whether white collar workers would unionize or not. These institutional norms derived from founding conditions will be examined in this chapter.

**Possessive Individualism**

Possessive individualism is a theory that states that the individual is the sole proprietor of his or her skills, owing nothing to society for them. As such, an individual can take those skills and make them available to a company or employer that best suits the individual’s self-interest. In many cases, this company or employer is the so-called “highest bidder.” By choosing the employer that can compensate him the best an employee is maximizing his potential to earn money, which will in turn allow him to consume goods of a greater quality or quantity than he would had he chosen a job with lesser compensation. This follows an important aspect of possessive individualism: that

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individual worth and consumption are the primary signifiers of self-worth. With monetary worth and consumption of material goods assigned this level of importance, it stands to reason that modern white collar workers are disinclined to unionize. Companies tend to prefer the status quo; a worker attempting to change that status quo by agitating for a bilateral bargaining system might find his career opportunities at that company limited. As previously established, the theory of possessive individualism dictates that an individual is motivated at all times to increase his self-worth by increasing his monetary-worth. Therefore, risking career opportunities to be involved in organized labor is not something that comes naturally to someone working under these founding conditions.

Furthermore, union activity is by its very nature a group effort. Only by acting collectively is the group able to achieve its goals. However, in this country, property and worth are viewed as the achievement of an individual, not a group. This provides further disincentives for workers to join unions. This attitude is reflected in the rise of individualized pay, starting in the 1980s. At the time of its inception, this type of pay structure was more commonly found in white collar firms like banks and companies in the retail sector. The theory of possessive individualism indicates that performance-related pay or merit pay should be very attractive to a worker in the United States.

Succeeding on one’s own virtues and being compensated in kind speaks directly to that

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3 Ibid., 84.

mindset, and simultaneously is anathema to the accepted wisdom put forth by unions, which frequently striving for equal pay for all.

Founding conditions in the United States as drove individuals to feel very strongly about the sanctity of property and ownership rights that derived from property. Because these property rights are achievements of the individual, they don’t carry with them the sense of national duty or community obligation that is more commonly seen in Europe. Amongst these obligations might be a sense of shared purpose with fellow workers; lacking that, we can see how there might be less motivation to organize for the benefit of the greater good of an entire group.

Moreover, these institutional norms have given rise to a type of capitalism that contains strong protection for employer property rights. This stands to reason – if individuals feel very strongly about the primacy of their property rights, they are able to sympathize with and support a factory owner interested in protecting the rights of his property. This mentality would seem at odds with the basic self-interest of most workers, but it does begin to get at one explanation for overall attitudes in the United States that skew pro-business and anti-union.

As previously stated, central to the notion of possessive individualism is the idea that individuals “own” their skills. This can be seen directly in one of the more unique aspects of the formation of unionism in the United States: our heritage of craft unions.

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6 Ibid.
As we saw in our brief historical overview of labor relations in America, the first unions to form were made up of skilled craftsmen. This stood in contrast to the Marxian model seen in some European countries in which “an embittered and increasingly class conscious proletariat united by its common hatred of all employers [sought to use] trade unions as instruments for the preparation of social revolution.”⁷ This was not the case here in the States, as craftsmen were far from embittered; in fact, they were some of the best paid and most well-off workers in the labor force of the early 1800s. What concerned these workers was the ability to get the best rate for their skills, and to demonstrate personal ownership of their job. This can certainly be attributed to possessive individualism. We see then that even in the genesis of the American labor movement was a bias that would eventually contribute to its weakening.

Ownership of skills goes beyond that for white collar workers. As was just discussed, property was long the dominant source of income for much of the middle class, leading to widespread respect for the sanctity of property rights. Yet for white collar workers, occupation has taken the place of property.⁸ Occupation now denotes class position, status position and provides income, thus it is the ability to buy and sell these skills on the market that matters most to white collar workers.

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Class Distinctions

Having an awareness of one’s class standing is a significant factor in predicting interest in joining a union. Seymour Lipset and Noah Meltz say that “the more privileged a group is in terms of income or status, the more likely it has been to reject the appeal of trade unions.” As previously established, workers in the United States generally aspire to wealth and status as a result of possessive individualism. Seeking that type of status makes one aware of class distinctions, and white collar workers, particularly since they are on a whole more affluent, would certainly find their attitudes towards unions affected by this.

Class distinctions can even go beyond that when it comes to explaining low levels of white collar workers joining unions. Workers in the United States accept the division between ownership and employment, and work within the capitalist system. This ready acceptance of a designation between classes is not something found in all industrial nations, and it speaks to the fact that by and large American unions shied away from the partisan politics and workplace militancy that would categorize a labor movement more focused on engaging in class warfare. As a group of workers relatively new to industrial relations in this country, white collar workers are likely to see this distinction and

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question the necessity of joining a union and “taking sides,” especially if they understand and accept their role in the capitalist system, as our institutional norms suggest they would.

Moreover, there is less of a stark distinction, in terms of class, between employee and managers in white collar workplaces. Roger Smith says “a greater degree of social and educational homogeneity between managers and managed is likely [at white collar firms], so that lower social distance and the existence of career ladders may be more apparent.”\(^\text{12}\) This is to say that white collar workers have resisted unionization because they haven’t seen it as necessary. To them, the barriers of advancing their career and their economic status don’t seem insurmountable. They have both an educational and technological skill set very similar to their boss and they often work in close physical proximity with him.\(^\text{13}\) They see managers and executives that are not all that dissimilar from themselves, which makes it easy for a while collar worker to convince himself that he just needs to put his head down and eventually he will rise through the ranks and achieve greater wealth and status.

Undeniably, class issues present an interesting puzzle for white collar workers. Unions don’t simply fight for the economic advancement of their members- at times unions have played a critical role when it comes to issues of social justice. Take, for example, immigrant rights. In the 1960s the United Farm Workers helped organize farm


workers in California’s grape and lettuce industries, and in the 1990s the Service Employees International Union worked to organize janitors.\textsuperscript{14} Most of the workers organized by these two efforts were recent immigrants, and as a result of these actions found their standing much improved. They made better wages and gained safer working conditions, certainly; but more importantly they were able to view themselves as a productive and welcomed member of society. White collar workers, however, are unlikely to find much to identify with in either scenario. As many white collar workers already experience relative affluence, a union’s ability to provide social justice is something that would matter little to them.

\textbf{Union Benefits and Attitudes of Self-help}

Referring to the writings of John R. Commons, Bruce Kaufman writes “unions play two important roles, one economic and the other non-economic. Consider first the economic. The economic function of unions, [Commons] said in 1906 (reprinted in Commons 1913, p. 121), is ‘wealth redistribution’, ‘joint aggrandizement’ and ‘protection’… the non-economic function of unions… is to provide what [Commons] called ‘constitutional government in industry.’”\textsuperscript{15} Kaufman also refers to constitutional government in industry as “industrial democracy” and says that this manner of self

\begin{multicols}{2}
\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{15}] Bruce Kaufman, “Prospects for Union Growth in the United States in the Early 21\textsuperscript{st} Century” in \textit{Unions in the 21\textsuperscript{st} Century: An International Perspective}, ed. Anil Verma et al. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 49.
\end{itemize}
\end{multicols}
governance by workers is important to protect rights and use sanctions to protect agreed upon working rules. What if white collar workers don’t feel that they need either the economic or non-economic benefits of unions? That would certainly contribute to an explanation of the low levels at which these types of workers organize.

This attitude reveals another of the institutional norms deriving from founding conditions of the American labor movement: a strong tradition of self-help. In this country there is an expectation that individuals should overcome hardship on their own.\(^\text{16}\) This is likely derived from our nation’s Protestant heritage and the sense of American exceptionalism. As C. Wright Mills notes, “underlying the modern approach to work there seems to be a vague feeling that ‘one should earn one’s own living,’ a kind of Protestant undertow, attenuated to a secular convention.”\(^\text{17}\) Individuals in this country want to stand on their own merits, and not be reliant on assistance from others. This is what many view unions as doing – helping certain people to increase their earning potential in a way that they would otherwise be unable to do on their own.

This tradition of self-help could be seen in some of the earliest efforts of labor organization in this country: grassroots movements. Ironically, when labor leaders attempted to fold these movements into their broader causes and bring their type of formalized organization to the grassroots, they in effect turned off many workers, even though both methods (grassroots and formal organizations) were purportedly trying to

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achieve the same goals. That is to say, this self-help mobilization bias won’t completely prevent workers from organizing, but it does limit the amount of organizing that they are willing to do that isn’t categorized as self-organizing.

Another way that this tradition of self-help manifests itself is in the value that American professionals place on jobs that have greater amounts of autonomy. Workers in white collar occupations typically exhibit high degrees of job satisfaction due to the freedom of personal decision and room for creativity that the autonomy inherent to their type of work provides. Indeed, Lipset and Meltz say that this helps explain “the greater aversion of U.S. professionals to labor unions compared to manual workers because they undermine the desire to organize and act collectively to achieve some greater measure of standing.” White collar workers are not interested in being a part of anything that takes away their ability to act independently to better themselves, as this might diminish the sense of status and importance that their profession already provides them.

A Conservative Labor Movement

The cumulative effect of these institutional norms gave rise to a predominantly conservative labor movement, and one that was particularly focused on economic issues rather than progressive reforms. This conservative working class meant that by and

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19 Ibid.

large there was limited support for a radical element within the labor movement. Many of these conservative attitudes likely stemmed from the founding principles of the United States; that life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are rights inherently bestowed on all men by a higher power. In so saying we can infer that “property ownership is an extension of the natural liberties bestowed on individuals by God.”

That is to say that Americans, and the American government, tends towards libertarianism. Despite our heated and much publicized debates between the “left” and the “right” in this country, America is by and large a right-of-center nation, which is aligned with the views held by the Founding Fathers that smaller government is preferential.

Indeed, American unionism for much of the last century centered on two rather conservative principles: lack of regulation, and belief in the power of the market. The relative political strength of management and those that control capital has proven throughout the history of American labor relations to be sufficient to protect broad areas of managerial influence from government regulation. The market ensures effective collective bargaining because it is not in the interest of either workers or management, to negotiate a contract that would cause the firm to struggle against its competition. Both of these principles, deregulation and a free market, are at the heart of collective bargaining the private sector. George Hildebrand says that the result of these conservative leanings was “a society dominated by relatively unregulated private organizations consisting

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mainly of business corporations, with some craft unions sprinkled here and there, and with all of it tied together by an economy of self-regulating markets.”

For the purpose of white collar workers, the end result of this conservative orientation was a rise of a type of unionism that ultimately would not appeal to them, as will be demonstrated in later chapters.

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CHAPTER THREE
THE NATURE OF WHITE COLLAR WORK

White Collar Workers and Traditional Union Motives

White collar work is different in many ways from blue collar work. C. Wright Mills describes it thus: “In no sphere of twentieth-century society has the shift from the old to new middle-class condition been so apparent, and its ramification so wide and deep, as in the professions. Most professionals are now salaried employees; much professional work has become divided and standardized and fitted into the new hierarchical organizations of educated skill and service… [and] successful professional men become more and more the managerial type.”¹ As such, white collar workers are frequently motivated by desires that deviate from the traditional forces that spur unionization. In his essay on trade unions and their contemporary roles, Mike Rigby states that “white collar staff gave less importance to traditional collective bargaining objectives and broader social objectives than other groups of staff.”² This stands in contrast to what Rigby establishes as the conventional models of trade union behavior; the use of political power and influence to pursue broad class projects, paired with acting in concert to take actions to oppose or support political priorities as designated by the


² Mike Rigby, “Approaches to the Contemporary Role of Trade Unions,” in European Trade Unions: Change and Response, ed. Mike Rigby et al. (New York: Routledge, 1999), 23.
unions. This contrast in priorities between the unions and white collar workers would certainly stand as a reason that white collar workers have unionized in smaller numbers over the previous several decades.

It would be fair to assume that many – although certainly not all – white collar workers come from a middle- or upper-middle-class background, meaning that they are far less concerned with taking actions to pursue the economic advancement of the working class. Moreover, they likely hold jobs and work in industries where their primary goals in the workplace are their own advancement: the ability to earn raises and promotions, and to “climb the corporate ladder.” Certain actions unions are traditionally known for are a direct anathema to those objectives. It is therefore fair to surmise that if labor leaders are interested in attracting and organizing white collar workers, they should shift their focus towards breaking down the barriers that form workplace hierarchies, permitting more opportunities for advancement and individual achievement. Indeed, Rigby says that unions should rethink their role in contemporary workplaces, and that this would involve moving away from “oppositional and economist dominated approaches to employer relations and a centralized, official-dominated structure.” White collar workers are much more likely to think of themselves in individualistic terms, and show concern for their own personal goals and advancement; it is therefore not surprising that they would be repelled by a traditional union structure.

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3 Mike Rigby, “Approaches to the Contemporary Role of Trade Unions,” in European Trade Unions: Change and Response, ed. Mike Rigby et al. (New York: Routledge, 1999), 22.

4 Ibid., 37.
More generally, this new economy dominated by white collar workers calls into question some of the basic assumptions about industrial relations. In an essay in the *Labor Relations* journal, Michael Piore and Sean Stafford say, “Industrial relations theory assumes that actors act purposefully, generally in an economic environment where they are seeking to maximize some monetary value – the firm profits, the unions, the income of their members or their membership base. But identity groups in the new system seem to be motivated as much by the desire for social recognition as by economic gain, and the pressures they exert seem to be largely moral and symbolic rather than economic.”\(^{5}\) It has been established in earlier chapters that white collar workers are very concerned with personal status – both achieving it and preserving it. If what Piore and Safford say is true, that workers in the new economy have complicated motives that go beyond financial gain, and if these workers have the perception that unions can only aid them in attaining financial gain, then it is possible to conclude that this is one explanation for why white collar workers show little interest in unionism.

Consider this, as well: for many years unions have made the pursuit of job security fundamental, sometimes even at the expense of wages and benefits.\(^{6}\) Yet in the changing employment contract, particularly in the white collar workforce, stability is constantly losing relevance. Workers want the flexibility to change companies as they

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please to advance their own career, and employers want the flexibility to move their capital to the markets that are most favorable to their bottom line. If flexibility is tantamount, then a desire for tenure becomes less pressing, and many long-held union benefits such as seniority, job-security and retirement benefits are predicated on the assumption of a desire for tenure.\(^7\) Considering the changing employment contract between management and workers, these traditional union motives and benefits do not speak to the interests of white collar workers. This is yet another explanation for their paltry membership numbers.

**Perceptions of Work: Safety, Physicality and Status**

The shift in the American economy from industrial work to service and retail-based work was accompanied by an overall shift in management practices and attitudes. As management came to treat its work force less capriciously, and as working conditions themselves became less dangerous, many issues that had driven the labor movement were no longer relevant. In his essay “The Convergence/Divergence Debate,” Roger Smith points out that “white collar work is less obviously arduous and hazardous, so that physical exploitation may appear less.”\(^8\) This doesn’t make aspects of white collar work any less exploitative; long hours, unfair compensation and psychological or emotional abuses can all be present in white collar workplaces. It’s simply that there is a perception

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among white collar workers that these issues aren’t worthy of collective action to force improvement. The issue is the context of work – unions and collective action are widely thought of residing in the blue collar domain, and the sociological and physical factors of white collar work further reinforce this. If there is to be an increase in white collar unionism, it will be when those workers begin to equate more modern and pressing workplace concerns (work-family balance, flexible schedules, protection of too-frequently-eroding benefits) on a level equal to the threat of bodily harm in the workplace, as faced by the previous generation of workers.

Status, too, plays a role in perception of work and unions. As discussed earlier, class distinctions do play a role in determining union behavior. An individual’s perception of the status of his job is a key part of self-identity and self-worth. Studies have shown⁹ that white collar workers view themselves as having a higher social status than blue collar workers (Table 3.1). C. Wright Mills, who is credited with defining what a white collar worker is, says that “the social esteem white-collar employees have successfully claimed is one of their important defining characteristics.”¹⁰ This sense of superiority creates a barrier to union growth among white collar workers. In part this may be because the sense of identity, self-worth and purpose that they provide for themselves through personal assessment of the status of their jobs is something unions historically have provided for blue collar workers.


Table 3.1 Workers by Occupation Identifying Themselves as Middle or Upper Class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>White Collar</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive/Managerial</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonteaching Professionals</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers/Professors</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical Workers</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Blue Collar</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Production/Craft Workers</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service Workers</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operators/Laborers</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Along with this sense of status, white collar workers strongly identify with their profession or occupation. Unions currently spend much of their efforts on workers that feel strong ties to a single employer or job site.\(^\text{11}\) By ignoring the needs of workers that feel strong occupational links, unions are marginalizing white collar workers. White collar workers perceive their work as part of their identity, much as craftsmen did hundreds of years before them. Indeed, by developing “occupational unionism” based on the old model of craft unionism\(^\text{12}\) it is possible that labor leaders could finally reach white collar workers in a way that interests and engages them. As it stands, however, the lack of occupational unionism is a contributing factor in the low rates of white collar unionism.

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\(^\text{12}\) Ibid.
The Rise of Non-Traditional Forms of Employment

Since the 1980s, various forms of non-traditional employment have become increasingly common in all industries. Collectively called the “contingent workforce” this type of work includes part-time employees and temporary workers. The temporary services industry in particular has experienced remarkable growth, increasing at ten times the rate of overall employment.\(^\text{13}\) Confirming the expansion of this type of employment, Bruce Kaufman says “the decline of union density in the last half of the 20\(^{th}\) century arose from a reversal in many of the factors promoting increased density in the first half… including the relative spread of non-traditional forms of employment (contingent workers, part-time employment), an employment shift toward occupations/industries that are not union-prone (e.g., information technology, services, retail trade).”\(^\text{14}\) Kaufman raises two key points in this statement. One, the changing nature of what a worker is makes organizing modern workers difficult. Two, more of these new types of workers are found in mainly white collar industries that aren’t traditional union power bases. To the first part of his statement, there are an ever increasing number of so called non-traditional workers. These would be individuals that are working exclusively on a temporary basis, working from home, or working on a part-time schedule. Many of these


contingent workers are found in two areas that are at opposite ends of the economic spectrum: low-wage temporary workers (like immigrant day laborers) and white collar workers with technical skills. Not only are these types of workers difficult to organize, in some cases they have found alternatives to unions when it comes to organizing.

One of these types of union alternatives is quasi-unions. Quasi-unions are “the broad range of organizations that have emerged to represent the interests of otherwise unrepresented people in their work lives and in their relationships with their employer.”

On the surface, this definition of a quasi-union sounds very much like the definition of a union. However, because there is no formal relationship between a quasi-union and the employer, they can’t truly be considered unions. It’s clear though, that for some white collar workers quasi-unions are filling the role that a union otherwise would.

Many quasi-unions can also be called membership associations or professional associations. They are groups within an industry that allow workers to share experience and expertise with one another, and to help them gain awareness of other individuals with interests that align with theirs. For white collar workers, these associations are major representative bodies that undertake tasks like economic representation and serve as a functional alternative to unions. As previously established in the discussion of occupational unionism, strong professional identification is negatively related to union support. Many of these workers are joining these associations to advance their career,


and to learn from and interact with like-minded professionals from many organizations outside their own; by traditional union priorities, structure and actions, joining a union does not enable white collar workers to achieve these tasks. When asked, 78% of white collar workers not currently in a union have said they would endorse the formation of a professional association, compared to only 43% with an interest in a union. Clearly white collar workers have a noticeable preference for this type of quasi-union.

Within the information technology field, an industry dominated by white collar workers, an example of a quasi-union is Working Today. By representing workers in the publishing and media field that are self-employed or freelancing, Working Today manages to represent and organize a group of workers that a traditional union would have found nearly impossible to organize. Indeed, the workers that are members of Working Today benefit from the service and advocacy provided by this group and would find little need to join a traditional union. It is plain that the presence of quasi-unions in white collar industries is contributing to the lack of traditional union membership on the part of white collar workers.

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The CWA and Telecommunications Workers: An Example of Success

Unions have long struggled to organize workers in high-technology and service industries, such as telecommunications. An example, however, of a union that is attempting to appeal to white collar workers is the Communications Workers of America (CWA). The CWA was formed in the 1940s by merging a number of regional and company-based unions that represented workers in the telephone industry, and in the beginning it was largely made up of workers that are considered to be blue collar; wirelayers, repairmen and network technicians, to name a few. Yet the telephone industry changed dramatically towards the end of the twentieth century. Companies in that industry are now more accurately referred to as “information-technology” companies, and employ many types of workers that are considered to be white collar, such as computer programmers and customer service representatives. In recent decades, the CWA has attempted to reinvent itself to include these types of workers that were not a traditional part of their base. This diversification enabled it to remain the largest telecommunication workers’ union in the world, despite losing 100,000 jobs over 15 years from its core jurisdiction. Additionally, by merging and associating with other unions in the wider information services industry, they have been able to increase their

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membership and, more vitally, increase the visibility of the content side of the information industry, which includes many more white collar workers such as writers, engineers and directors at news and radio stations.\textsuperscript{22} The CWA can now claim tens of thousands of those types of workers as part of their membership.

To overcome the proclivity of white collar workers to avoid unionizing and the general resistance to unions demonstrated by management in the private sector, the CWA used several different techniques for organizing; one-on-one recruitment, creation of workplace committees, and training and leadership development programs.\textsuperscript{23} Each of these methods addresses the institutional norms that were discussed in the previous chapter. The CWA succeeded by directly combating the built-in white collar tendencies to avoid organizing. One-on-one recruitment speaks to the sense of status and self-reliance that white collar workers feel. By addressing a worker as an individual, rather than part of a collective whole, they can make him feel important and wanted. Workplace committees promote engagement and interaction with management and an investment in the well being of the company, something that workers have a predisposition towards because of the primacy of property rights and respect of ownership of property. Additionally, these types of committees are responding to the growing use of the human resource management model, which allows both employer and

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\end{flushright}
employee to solve problems in a setting that is formalized yet not intrinsically hostile or adversarial; the impact of this employment system on white collar unionization will be discussed in a subsequent chapter. Finally, training and leadership development programs speak to the benefits that workers might otherwise find from a quasi-union like a professional association. In the case of the CWA, by providing the opportunity for apprenticeship programs they ensured that the workers it was trying to organize wouldn’t need to look elsewhere to gain this type of career enhancement.

Collectively, many of the strategies being employed by the CWA can be called the “organization model” of unionism. Simply put, this is a method in which labor leaders go out and actively solicit new members. This begs the question: are white collar workers not joining unions for the simple fact that no one is asking them? The CWA is one of the few examples of a union actively recruiting white collar workers, and they’re also one of the few examples of a union that has had success in promoting white collar unionism. It’s hard to believe that these two facts are completely unrelated.

The ability of the CWA to remain a powerful and influential force in their industry, despite the erosion of their traditional recruitment base, serves as an example of how other industries can successfully pursue an increase in white collar unionism. By anticipating early-on the need to expand the scope and type of workers they represent, and to actively address the concerns that these new types of white collar workers bring to


labor organizations, CWA presents a viable model for both retaining union density in industries historically friendly to unions and increasing union density in industries that have not proved to be fertile ground for organized labor.
CHAPTER FOUR

STRUCTURAL CHANGE IN THE WORKPLACE

Structural change describes the overall impact of changes in employment practices, demographics and public policy on the American workforce. Characteristics of workers and employment relationships that were previously taken for granted or assumed as constants in the study of labor relations have shifted in the previous several decades. The overall decline in unionization rates is at least in part, if not primarily, due to the structural change in the economy and labor forces resulting from the rapid growth of employment in sectors with a historically low propensity to unionize, like white collar and service sector employees.¹

The Transformation of the Economy from Goods to Services

C. Wright Mills aptly describes the changing nature of the economy and the rise of white collar workers when he says “their skills involve the handling of paper and money and people. They are expert at dealing with people transiently and impersonally; they are masters of the commercial, professional and technical relationship. The one thing they do not do is live by making things.”² This transformation from an economy of

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goods to an economy of services\textsuperscript{3} directly bears on the issue of white collar unionism. Jobs in the “goods economy” had been the core membership for unions. Many of these jobs producing goods were industrial in nature and had the kind of dangerous or difficult working conditions that spurred the rise of the labor movement a century earlier. As the economic vigor of these highly unionized industries suffered, it would have led to a decline in overall union membership.\textsuperscript{4} Jobs in the “service economy” however were not nearly as dangerous or difficult, so as this structural change in the economy took place, so too did demand for union representation. In fact, a study in the book \textit{What Do Unions Do?} by Richard Freeman and James Medoff found that this structural change in the labor market in the United States was largely responsible for a 72\% decline in union membership density over the twenty-five year period from 1954-1979.\textsuperscript{5}

This shift in the nature of the economy has gone so far as to shake the very foundation and purpose of unions: the collective bargaining process. The process for collective bargaining in the United States came of age in an industrial society, one that did not give much consideration to the notion of the market as an invisible force influencing all decisions. In recent decades that system has collapsed in favor of one wholly centered on market forces and policies deferential to the importance of that

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{3} Leo Troy, \textit{The Twilight of the Old Unionism} (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), 17.
\item \textsuperscript{5} Leo Troy, \textit{The Twilight of the Old Unionism} (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), 17.
\end{itemize}
Throughout this chapter it will be clear that an awareness of the market will have a profound impact on both white collar workers’ willingness to unionize and the tolerance of employers towards such actions.

**Workplace Size**

There is no doubt that white collar unionism has been affected by changing standards for workplace size. Many companies in the service sector have responded to structural changes in the global economy by becoming smaller and more efficient. From a strictly practical standpoint, it was easier and cheaper for unions to organize a single workplace with a 1,000 workers than it is now to organize 100 workplaces of 10 workers each. This movement towards consolidation and hyper-efficiency in the workplace is often referred to as “tertiarization.” Tertiarization focuses on the internal services of a company like their level of technology, product development, design and logistics, training, and value-chain management. By bringing in-house many services that would have been previously spread across an entire industry, it allows firms to get smaller and more efficient, and also means that a greater number of jobs in these manufacturing companies are now white collar. Yet as we just mentioned, these smaller firms are more

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difficult for labor organizers to reach and unionize. So from a structural standpoint, we can see that the manufacturing sector, a traditional union base, is simultaneously becoming harder to unionize even while there are fewer jobs that would attract workers likely to be interested in unionizing.

Additionally, workers at smaller firms have been shown to experience greater job satisfaction than those in bigger firms (Table 4.1). This is likely due to a worker’s ability to form a sense of community with a smaller company, and to feel like they know their bosses and supervisors on a personal level. There is also less of a barrier for them to be able to witness the direct effect of their contribution on the company’s overall finished product. If many firms in the service sector have been following a trend to become smaller and more efficient, and if workers in smaller firms have greater job satisfaction, it stands to reason that many workers in these smaller firms would feel little incentive or pressure to become union members.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.1 Percentage of Workers Answering “Yes” by Company Size</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Small Company (less than 49 workers)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I often feel energized”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Inspires the best in me”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I’m willing to put forth more effort”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I feel passionate about my job”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In a way, workplace size is coming full circle. One of the original purposes of unions was to provide a form of governance as economic activity was moved from the household to a factory. When the means of production were in the household (a small workplace size) governance was effective and personal; governance in the factory (a large workplace size) needed to be scientific and rational\(^9\), and unions ably filled that role. As our new economy returns to smaller workplaces, it is unrealistic to expect that there would ever be a complete return to the style of governance once found in a household; but it is easy to see how many workers might begin to perceive unions as unnecessary, as a smaller workplace allows for the return of more personal and individualized governance, bargaining and conflict resolution. What’s more, smaller workplaces promote creativity, community, communication and a lack of structure that allows individuals to stand out – all characteristics prized by white collar workers.\(^{10}\) If unions are unlikely to be found in smaller workplaces, and if white collar workers prefer these types of workplaces, it is evident that a shrinking of workplace sizes is a factor in the lack of white collar unionism.

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Changing Labor’s Base: Structural Unemployment Through Tertiarization and Deindustrialization

Another side effect of tertiarization is the diminishing number of available jobs in certain industries. This shrinking often results in structural unemployment, a situation where there is a mismatch between demand in the labor market and the skills of the workers looking for jobs. In other words, workers can’t find employment because there are fewer overall jobs that they are specifically qualified for. Structural unemployment can result from industries moving out of certain geography regions. In others cases, the industry will remain in a region, but redefine the boundaries of the industry and blur the lines between different markets, thereby changing the nature of the industry and the type of workers they require. An example of this is the communications industry, which combined with the office technology, information technology, and printing industries

into one single industry – bearing a very different look from the original. Moreover, as firms strive for efficiency and self-reliance at every turn, it means that they are shedding jobs that are viewed as redundant, unnecessary, or a holdover from a previous economic model. For labor organizers, this results in a general disenfranchisement in the next generation of potential union members. If the jobs that these prospective workers would

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have been qualified for have been eliminated, they have been structurally unemployed, and the union’s potential base has been further weakened.\textsuperscript{12} Deindustrialization also plays a role in changing the face of the workforce. Workers in areas that were traditionally home to manufacturing jobs have watched these industries move overseas, leaving them little choice but to find any type of work available. The manufacturing industries that moved away were frequently replaced by firms providing contingent labor to other industries. For example, in Tennessee in the 1980s hundreds of thousands of manufacturing jobs left the state, while at the same time contingent work opportunities increased 420\%.\textsuperscript{13} As was discussed in a previous chapter, contingent workers are difficult to organize and show low rates of union membership. The deindustrialization of the economy caused a structural shift that in effect took many workers who would previously have been likely to unionize, and shifted them to an area of the economy in which they were less likely to unionize.


Similarly, if jobs that had previously been union-eligible are reclassified to be ineligible to organize, those workers have been structurally removed from the potential pool of union members. This can be achieved primarily by increasing managerial employment outside the jurisdiction of federal laws that regulate labor relations.\textsuperscript{14} This is a critical distinction, particularly as it relates to white collar workers, many of whom end up being classified as supervisors or managers. By creating a workforce that is top-heavy with these types of positions, it is possible to have a workforce of similar size but one that is significantly less likely to join unions, as many of them are legally prohibited from doing so. Using the example of AT&T in the 1980s and 1990s, Table 4.2 shows this practice in action.

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|c|c|}
\hline
\textbf{Managers and Supervisors as Portion of Total Workforce} & \textbf{1980} & \textbf{1990} \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

The Impact of Globalization

Despite the rise of globalization and foreign competition threatening the success and survival of many American manufacturing companies, unions continued to pursue

traditional demands of higher wages and better benefits. By not recognizing or at least acknowledging the structural change of the economy and strategizing appropriately, unions further diminished both their effectiveness and their attractiveness to potential members. When faced with tough union demands in one locale, a company operating in a global marketplace can simply move its operations to a place not facing such union demands. Seeing as many white collar companies and industries have even fewer barriers than blue collar, manually-driven industries to prevent the movement of jobs (i.e., no factories to rebuild, no raw materials to ship), it may be that many white collar workers have resisted unionizing because they don’t want to organize themselves right out of employment.

Moreover, it’s been established that one of the primary ways that unions are able to benefit their members is by obtaining economic gains such as higher wages in the face of competition from lower-wage, non-union sources of labor. This means that organized labor has been most successful in industries where entry by new firms is difficult. If it was simple for new firms to enter the industry, the unionized companies would face constant competition from the low-cost, non-unionized new comers. This ease of entry typifies many white collar service industries, as many of these companies don’t require large capital startup costs like machinery or means of production. Some firms need little


more than desks and the workers to man them, as the intellectual capital of the workers is the means of the production in those industries.

One of the hallmarks of globalization is that American companies are no longer competing with the company across town; they are competing with firms on the other side of the globe. These firms may have dramatically lower capital costs due to proximity to market, the cost of raw materials, and especially local wage levels that are in many cases dramatically lower than what American workers expect to make. Keeping pace with this competition frequently means making cuts, and those cuts often take the form of jobs earning those higher American wages. Workers have an awareness of the supreme mobility of capital across national boundaries, particularly in white collar industries; as previously established, the barriers for these types of companies to move are especially low. It may be that white collar workers avoid joining unions because they have no desire to “upset the apple cart.” While it’s certainly true that organizing might gain them slightly higher wages or improved working conditions, it’s equally likely that collective action will inspire their company to shut down production and move to a country where the labor force is less mobilized. These workers are doing the calculus that an imperfect job is better than no job at all, and it’s reflected in their union participation rates.

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Filling the Role of Unions: Human Resource Management and Employee Voice

The growing practice of employers communicating with their employees has also prevented the development of white collar unionism. The introduction of alternative voices for workers has become common as corporations have increasingly realized that their employees are tangible and valuable assets, and that managers stand to gain by paying attention to the ideas and needs of workers.\(^{18}\) This is a hallmark of the human resource style of management adopted by many white collar firms in the last couple of decades. In the human resource management model, employees often work in teams that are centrally directed by management. This system strives to sustain a corporate culture that is managerially-driven,\(^ {19}\) with particular emphasis on individualized rewards and career development – all of which are prized by white collar workers.

Another aspect of this type of employment model is the effort made to get employees to identify their interests with the long-term interests of the firm. They achieve this through offering skill development, promises of stability and, especially, excellent communication. Unlike traditional employment models, human resource management is reliant on extensive corporate communication, sometimes referred to as employee voice. In the globalized economy, the creation of information and services is a


value-adding activity for a company;\textsuperscript{20} an activity which is, in many ways, equally as important as whatever goods that company might manufacture. The manufacture of this information is both a product that a company can provide to its stakeholders and something that employees can provide to their employer.

Employee voice and participation in workplace decisions was always a primary benefit of unions, and now those opportunities are becoming standard even in non-union environments. Many firms in the service industry give their employees the things that unions provide: good salaries and benefits, employee voice, and safe working conditions. With such protections built in from their own employers, white collar workers have felt relatively little need to organize against the companies that provide their livelihoods. This is why careful human resource management is often viewed as a substitute for unions, and many firms that use this style of management are doing so specifically to discourage organization amongst their employees. By even going so far as to provide services like grievance procedures that are traditionally only found in union firms\textsuperscript{21}, companies with this type of sophisticated type of employment model are truly attempting the fill the role of a union. It stands to reason then that if many white collar workers are employed by firms using human resource management, they may see little opportunity or

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need to join a union, thus driving down overall levels of unionization amongst white collar workers.

The rise of human resource management has contributed to a decline in union membership in one additional way: because the hallmark of human resource management is to deal with employees fairly and engage them in aspects of the decision making process, and since only a workforce that is feeling maligned and quite unsatisfied with their conditions will take action to form a union, it is logical that a firm properly implementing a human resource management style is highly unlikely to find their workers unionizing.

**Technology and its Role in Changing the Workforce**

Introducing new technology into an industry has long been shown to be a way to change industrial relations, in that any change in technology is going to impact the number, ratio and substance of jobs. New technology has the power to shake up existing practices and relationships between management and labor, leading to both positive innovation and causing conflict and power struggles between the two groups.

In the case of white collar workers, a major structural change has been the rise of technology in the manufacturing sector. As new technology has taken the place of older methods, there has been an associated change in occupations. Jobs that had previously

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been filled by blue collar workers performing manual labor are now able to be filled by white collar workers operating a computer or overseeing an automated facility. The introduction of machines into a workplace changes the so-called “institutional knowledge” held by long-time employees. The know-how possessed by blue collar workers, and previously prized by management, passes from those workers into the possession of skilled engineers and the machines themselves; displacing unskilled workers and making craft skills antiquated.\(^{24}\) Not only does this change driven by technology bring workers into the workforce who are less inclined to join a union, it simultaneously eliminates jobs, including union-friendly jobs, by becoming more efficient. So advancements in technology impact both union membership and union density.\(^{25}\) In other words, here again we see the concept of structural unemployment that was discussed earlier in this chapter. Leo Troy states in *The Twilight of the Old Unionism* that “executive and related categories and professional jobs are being substituted for blue collar occupations in the production process… [leading to] a workforce unreceptive or even hostile to unionism.”\(^{26}\) This point is illustrated in Table 4.2, which shows the change in the occupational breakdown of the manufacturing sector in the last decades of the 20\(^{\text{th}}\) century. This model of replacing less skilled manufacturing jobs with jobs that have managerial and technical expertise is called a “lean” production


\(^{26}\) Ibid.
system.\textsuperscript{27} This work system is meant to improve organizational performance and keep decision making in a more centralized location, yet these goals are certainly met at the cost of positive attitudes towards unionism.

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It is difficult to argue the overall positive effect that technology has had on our economy. Technological advancement in the United States in recent decades has caused an overall rise in the real gross domestic product. Yet during this period of rise in real GDP, we see a displacement of basically-educated workers, causing a drop in their wages compared to more educated workers.\textsuperscript{28} Seeing this wage disparity, basically-educated workers, traditionally found in blue collar types of employment, are likely to seek out employment opportunities in the service sector – a white collar domain. In this manner, technology contributes to the shift of workers from types of work where they are more likely to unionize to types of work where they are less likely to unionize.


CHAPTER FIVE
WHITE COLLAR PERCEPTION OF UNIONS

Throughout the period that the American economy was experiencing a rise in white collar workers and a decline in blue collar workers, it was also experiencing a hardening of attitudes towards organized labor. John Godard describes the American labor movement as becoming “anathema not just to the [political] right, but also to many on the left, who came to view it as a largely regressive and morally corrupt force.”1 If such negative perceptions of unions were indeed broadly held during a period of time when white collar workers were becoming the dominant type of labor, it would stand to reason that it would impact their interest in and willingness to join a union. Indeed, many of the impressions of unions among younger or new workers include the following: that unions are adversarial in nature, they willingly resort to violence, they are corrupt and eagerly go on strike, they are no longer needed, they are motivated by greed, and that workers who are in unions are lazy and unproductive.2 Whether any of these things are true or not is immaterial; the simple fact that white collar workers might believe them to be true is, in itself, sufficient justification to impact union membership. In this chapter we examine white collar perceptions of unions, and how mistaken or negative impressions might be suppressing their overall membership numbers.

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Are Unions Improving Work Lives?

Inexplicably, between the 1970s and the 1990s there was little to no effort on the part of union leaders to improve the quality of work life in the United States.\(^3\) This happened during the generational shift between workers who saw ample blue collar work opportunities and workers who began finding more opportunities for work in the service sector. As such, these workers were not predisposed or inclined to have a positive perception towards unions; during their working lives, unions had proven to offer little for them. Ironically, unions had chosen to sit out “the most significant workplace reform movement of the last half of the twentieth century,”\(^4\) namely the shift towards a human resource model of management and the quality of work life (QWL) movements.

There was significant debate during this time of what the primary purpose of unions was. Was their purpose to help ensure economic stability and prosperity, or was it instead to provide democratic rights at work? Was the over-riding function of unions to address broader class conflict, or was it to provide a framework for the discipline necessary at the industrial point of production?\(^5\) Some might argue that the most important traditional purpose of unions was the protection of craft skills and control of


\(^4\) Ibid.

the deployment of skills to jobs.\(^6\) Regardless of which of these was in fact the primary purpose of unions, and it should go without saying that all of these functions are certainly important, it is clear how white collar workers new to labor market would be confused about whether unions had a goal of helping improve their work lives first and foremost, or if they were instead a proxy in a broader fight about social issues.

An important characteristic of the workplace lives of white collar workers that has been mentioned in previous chapters is their desire for independence and entrepreneurship in their job. White collar workers are looking for dynamic companies that display a voluntary coming together of “individuals with commitments and an organization with a mission” to form a community of purpose.\(^7\) This might also be described as the opportunity to innovate, and white collar workers perceive unions as not being to provide that opportunity. Unions are perceived as unaware of how to innovate, and as setting up barriers to innovation such as restrictive vertical relationships, poor lateral communication and limited tools and assistance for employees.\(^8\) White collar workers are looking for fulfillment and status in their work lives. The perception of unions as hierarchical, inflexible organizations unwelcome to new ideas means that white collar workers feel little incentive to join.

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Union Membership as an Experience Good

As union membership has declined, there have been fewer workers around to convey and explain the benefits of being a union member to other non-union workers. Rafael Gomez, Morley Gunderson and Noah Meltz explain that “if workers never experience any of these hard-to-observe benefits, they may be less inclined to become active dues paying members.” These union benefits include higher wages, protected workplace rights, a sense of belonging to a bigger cause, and opportunities to engage in the process of governing and affecting the daily working environment. Since many of these benefits mentioned by the authors are difficult to observe without already being a union member, and with the most easily observable benefit (superior wages for union workers) disappearing in the wake of recent economic events and pressure from globalization, it creates a catch-22: many workers don’t unionize because the only way for them to be aware of the benefits it offers is to already be unionized.

Gomez, Gunderson and Meltz categorize being a union member as an “experience-good.” This term can be used to categorize any good or service that needs to be sampled before purchase in order to determine the level of quality being offered. This is not to say that union membership’s status as an experience good is a completely negative thing. Many experience goods are extremely “sticky”; that is to say that once someone has decided to adopt the product or service in question, they become very loyal

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10 Ibid., 240.
to that particular product or service. It is the initial decision to use the product or service that is the primary hurdle for an experience good, provided of course that what is being offered is indeed of high quality.

In the specific case of union membership, the issue of quality may be of increasing concern. There was a time when the benefits of union membership were largely unquestioned. However, as globalization and the challenges of a changing economy have put unions of their heels, it may be that a young person deciding to become a union member wouldn’t find the experience to be inherently sticky the way we might have once assumed. Indeed, one of the defining features of a union member was long, if not life-long, tenure at one particular job. The social contract between employees and employers of the previous generation was built on a firm foundation of mutual loyalty. That social contract has changed for the current generation, however, with young workers finding less loyalty from firms looking to maximize flexibility and the workers themselves offering less loyalty in return, as themselves want the flexibility to consider other opportunities within their chosen career. It holds that if a worker views his current employment to be one of a shorter tenure, he is less likely to become invested in the company and his role there. A sense of purpose, identity, and permanence in a company and employment role has long been a critical step in a worker’s decision to become a member of a union.

What’s more, the authors discuss how a community and a social network can have an effect on levels of unionization. “Having a social environment consisting of friends and relatives who support unionization makes the probability of desiring unionization
higher than those lacking in such social connections.”\textsuperscript{11} We can see how this might have a dramatic effect on the levels of white collar unionism. As manufacturing jobs have dried up and moved away, fewer people have family members or friends doing this type of work, a type of work with much higher union density. While job opportunities in white collar fields become more plentiful, subsequent generations will go into these fields and knowledge about the benefits of unionizing will become further diluted, as a worker moves further away from the individuals in his social network that had knowledge of union benefits.

Indeed, the passage of attitudes towards unions from one generation to the next has been shown to play a critical role in how people form their own opinions towards unions. Close personal contact with union members or union leaders is often a decisive factor in determining an individual’s attitude towards unions, and an absence of that contact combined with negative or inaccurate perceptions of unions, like those discussed in this chapter, results in an anti-union sentiment.\textsuperscript{12} This is frequently the case with white collar workers. Gomez, Gunderson and Meltz found that “parents who are union members or have positive attitudes towards unions are more likely to pass those attitudes


and union status to their children.”

White collar workers are less likely to have had these attitudes passed to them from within their social network. In fact, in their article on declining union membership William Dickens and Jonathan Leonard cite one possible reason for the decline as “a decrease in the extent and intensity of union organizing efforts or by a decreased willingness on the part of workers to join unions. A decreased willingness of workers to vote union could be due, in turn, to attitudinal changes.”

These attitudinal changes in the workforce are a direct result of the influence and increase in white collar workers as a percentage of the workforce.

**Workers Who Unionize Are Disloyal**

As discussed in a previous chapter, many workers in white collar firms now work at firms that practice the human resource management style, a style that has gained increasing popularity over the last couple decades as an alternative to unions. Since employers using this management model feel that they are making a good-faith effort to work with their employees to meet their needs, it is likely that an employee taking an initiative to create a bilateral bargaining relationship will anger their employer. It’s possible they would even be viewed as disloyal by their employer.

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While it is of course false to imply that the above scenario applies to all employers in all industries, it is surely true for some; and that possibility alone is enough to foster the perception that taking action to start a union drive, or even joining a drive that has already started, will have a negative impact on how an employer views an employee. This is especially true in the case of white collar workers, so many of whom work in environments unfamiliar with unions, and who work for employers taking pains to create an atmosphere in which unions are unnecessary. It is clear how these workers might find it easy to perceive unionism as disloyal. It was established in the previous discussion of institutional norms that the sanctity of property rights is at the bedrock of American values. This attitude towards property rights engenders feelings of understanding towards management and owners, and thus feelings of disloyalty when acting in a manner that infringes on those rights. This norm is particularly reflected in the behavior of white collar workers. They are more likely than blue collar workers to hold positive attitudes about their relationship with management, and white collar workers more than blue collar workers readily believe that the interests of employers and employees are the same.\textsuperscript{16} It is not surprising that they feel this way. Many white collar workers are recipients of targeted efforts on the part of management to build corporate loyalty. White collar workers repeatedly have the closed communal nature of their company pointed out to them; a corporate environment that is variously described as

feudal communities, tribes or clans.\textsuperscript{17} This ability to understand and identify with their company and their managers means that white collar workers are less likely to unionize – a behavior that, in many cases, they would view as being not in the interest of the company.

As alluded to at the beginning of this section, the rise of human resource management as an employment model can itself serve to foster the perception of employee organization as being disloyal. The type of workplace participation fostered by human resource management takes away layers of bureaucracy, shifts decision making lower in the corporate chain, engages workers in the company’s goals and causes workers to identify with these goals. Devices such as internal career tracks (the practice of “climbing the ladder”) or the awarding of company stock as a benefit further ensures the loyalty of white collar employees.\textsuperscript{18} Once an employee begins to conflate his objectives with the objectives of the company, an action that is potentially detrimental to the company’s bottom line becomes a confusing proposition that clashes with the worker’s new dual identity of both employer and stake-holder of company goals. Unions thereby come to be viewed as threatening and disruptive, rather than as an employee’s ally and advocate.


\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 24.
Media Coverage of Unions

Another force driving negative impressions of unions for white collar workers is the media. As previously addressed, fewer white collar workers than ever are getting their information about unions from friends or family members that have themselves been a part of a union. Lacking a first hand source, it is possible to infer that for many white collar workers what information they get about unions comes from the media. It turns out that over the last several decades, the media has consistently portrayed unfavorable images of organized labor, both in news media coverage and depiction in movies and television shows.\(^{19}\) It is far more likely for the news media to cover a dramatic yet relatively infrequent union event, such as strike violence or the trial of a corrupt union official, than to cover negotiations related to collective bargaining in an industry.\(^{20}\) One of the few occasions that the media will give extensive coverage to labor negotiations is when they involve the owners and players in a professional sports league, and only then because the viewing public is invested in whether the teams will be taking the field or not in the upcoming season.

Even when the media does attempt a less biased portrayal of unions, it is often only through the lens of addressing widely held inaccuracies – which, of course, the media was largely responsible for creating in the first place. In an article in the *Washington Post* on February 21, 2010, Alec MacGillis identifies “myths” about the


\(^{20}\) Ibid., 108.
labor movement, including: unions are bad for the economy; labor laws are not an issue; unions have Democrats in their pocket; and the Employee Free Choice Act sought to radically reshape the job market. MacGillis goes on to disprove each of these notions, but the fact that it was necessary to debunk these sentiments proves that these inaccuracies about the labor movement are widely held.

It’s not just news coverage where the media can be said to be responsible for creating an unfavorable impression of unions. Popular entertainment, like movies and television, has never displayed a dominantly positive attitude towards organized labor. Even in the earliest forms of cinema in the beginning of the twentieth century, organized labor was portrayed as an unlikely solution to the problems of workers. These largely-negative impressions of unions on film continued for the next hundred years in movies like On the Waterfront, The Garment Jungle, Blue Collar, and Hoffa. It is not surprising, then, that after a century of being shown stories that equate unions and the workers that join them as dumb brutes and gangsters, white collar workers feel less inclined to join a union; especially considering that today’s white collar workers largely came of age in a time where media has an ever-increasing impact on public opinion.

**Identity Theory**

Perception of unions can also come to bear on issues of identity formation. Michael Piore and Sean Stafford relate an interesting anecdote about Italian workers in

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their essay “Changing Regimes of Workplace Governance, Shifting Axes of Social Mobilization, and the Challenge to Industrial Relations Theory.” They describe how a group of laborers from Southern Italy traveled north to find work. These laborers thought of themselves as peasants, and the northern workers that they were working alongside thought of them as peasants as well—more specifically, as interloping peasants that were temporarily taking advantage of the prosperity of the industrial north. The northern workers believed that after a time, these southerners would take the money they’d earned and return to the south, the new funds giving them an enhanced status within their peasant community. Yet the southern workers remained in the north for so long that they effectively were no longer peasants; they were now industrial workers, despite the fact that they continued to have a self-conception of being peasants. It wasn’t until an incident provoked a strike, during which northern and southern workers joined forces in participation, that the southerners were able to conceive of themselves as workers and not peasants. This was because participating in the strike allowed the northerners to perceive the southerners as workers, and in the southerners’ acceptance of this new identity both groups were able to mutually achieve benefit. How does this relate to white collar workers acceptance of unionism? It’s essentially the reverse of this anecdote.

White collar workers for the most part do not perceive of themselves as the type of people that would join a union. Therefore, they become (or rather, continue to be) the type of person that would not join a union. The story about the Italian workers would

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suggest that for white collar workers to begin organizing in great numbers there would have to be a catalyst (some economic event) that would allow white collar workers to make common cause with blue collar union members, thereby altering their sense of identity and accepting unions as something they can and should be a part of. As it currently stands, white collar workers see only the nature of unions that suppresses individuality and imposes bureaucratic standards.23 It is unlikely that they would find cause to seek solidarity with blue collar workers when this fundamental perception of unions stands in such contrast to the nature of white collar workers’ identities.

CHAPTER SIX

MOVEMENT POLITICS

To fully understand white collar unionism, it is necessary to examine the politics of labor relations in the United States. “Politics” in this case does not mean political parties – although political parties do have some role to play – but rather politics as in the theoretical alignment of ideas and values, particularly with respect to government policies. In the United States, after a brief flirtation with craft unionism early in development of labor relations, a system of business unionism took hold and became the dominant model over the last century or so. Despite concerted attempts by some labor leaders over the years, social movement unionism never really gained strength or was able to surpass business unionism as the preferred method of organizing workers. In fact, the pattern of idealistic unionism arising only to fall before the pragmatism of economistic union behavior has occurred several times in the history of American labor relations.¹ The over-reliance on business unionism instead of social movement unionism has been put forth as a theory for why the decline in the labor movement happened in the United States earlier than in many countries, and why that decline has been particularly severe here.² This chapter will examine the difference between these forms of unionism and the impact that it has had on white collar workers.


Business Unionism

Business unionism generally describes the union philosophy in which efforts are concentrated on improving wages, working conditions, hours and other economic benefits, rather than on the reform of the wider system of capitalism. As C. Wright Mills says, “unions are usually accepted as something to be used, rather than as something in which to believe.”³ That is to say, Americans view unions largely as a tool, instead of looking at them as an end in themselves. They are not necessarily viewed as having a role outside of that related to employment. The popularity of business unionism in the United States is a testament to the conservative nature of our labor movement. This, in turn, is a reflection of the social norms that gave rise to founding conditions of that movement, as discussed in Chapter Two. The focus on services may help members in the short run, but some feel that spending the bulk of resources on these services, to the detriment of mobilization, leaves unions exposed in the face of employer opposition to organization.⁴ This is exemplified by comparing the rise of business unionism in the pre-war years to the declining membership rates and political influence that followed in subsequent decades. This is not to say, however, that it is surprising that business movement unionism has been so popular in this country. The institutional norms of American society engendered mobilization biases and sympathies towards ownership of


capital which ensured that our labor movement would be economistic and conservative, rather than politically engaged and working towards progressive social reforms.\(^5\) By pinning the success of this type of unionism on its role as a market-oriented entity, the labor movement hoped to achieve a more lasting permanence.\(^6\) The thinking behind this model was that workers will always desire assistance in obtaining increases in wages and other benefits. Yet in the case of white collar workers, as we have seen in prior chapters, financial gain is certainly important but represents only one part of a larger work-life whole. Unionism that focuses solely on the economic does not resonate with white collar workers.

**Social Movement Unionism**

If not business unionism, what model should be used? Some scholars have suggested that the way to revitalize the labor movement and engage with groups like white collar workers is to return to a social movement unionism model, like the one that briefly flourished in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century. Social movement unionism is one built on member involvement and activism, a model which can drive institutional change when used in conjunction with broader social movements.\(^7\)

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After a long period during which unions found success by promising members job stability and wage protection, they have been unable to make headway into a white collar workforce that doesn’t always claim that as their first priority. As mentioned in earlier chapters, white collar workers seek a sense of identity in their work; social movement unionism is more ably situated than the business unionism model to provide this. By mobilizing workers around a set of identities rooted in craft and profession, unions are able to respond to broader social movements in which people demand their identities related to race, gender and sexual orientation be respected and acknowledged.\(^8\)

Aspects of that particular type of social movement aren’t as powerful or omnipresent as they were at the height of the civil rights movement or women’s liberation, but acknowledgement of sexual identity is certainly at the forefront of today’s politics, and workplace disparities related to race and gender are still far too common. By creating an identity as a “sword of justice,”\(^9\) unions can contest this type of discrimination and inequality, which in turn raises their profile and popularity. In the United States, the current awareness and focus on the aforementioned social issues may indicate a fertile ground for social movement unionism to take hold.

While on the surface social movement unionism would seem to appeal more to white collar workers than business unionism, it may be that even this model contains

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aspects that ultimately are a deterrent to white collar workers. Crucial aspects of social movement unionism include militancy in collective bargaining, strongly progressive values and a mentality among the rank and file that an injury to one is an injury to all.\textsuperscript{10} If a requirement of social movement unionism is a hedge towards radicalism, and our labor movement’s founding conditions have created a working class that is comparatively conservative and has shown little more than sporadic support for militancy or radicalism,\textsuperscript{11} it is unlikely that this type of organization will achieve broad support amongst white collar workers.

An additional barrier faced by social movement unionism, and a possible explanation for its current lack of use, is the high cost. This type of organizing is expensive,\textsuperscript{12} both in terms of the time invested on the part of labor leaders and the financial cost of running these types of membership drives. At a time when the labor movement is demonstrably weaker than it has ever been, it may be unrealistic to adopt a method of growth that requires additional resources when the movement is already strapped for resources and support as it is.


Grassroots Movements

Similar to social movement unionism, yet perhaps more in line with the social norms of workers in America, are grassroots movements. Broadly defined as movements that are natural and spontaneous, grassroots movements often operate outside traditional power structures. These movements are typically created and defined by a community, as it is local volunteers rather than a national organizer that design and drive these movements. In the United States, when people do decide to act collectively, the trend has been towards grassroots movements. This is likely a result of attitudes stemming from the country’s revolutionary past, which engendered what is on the whole a distrust of authority and the government, leading to peoples’ determination, and preference, to take matters into their own hands.

Grassroots movements also address another issue that has been an impediment to white collar unionism: the perception of corruption. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, white collar workers have an aversion to joining organizations with rigid leadership that do not permit the workers’ autonomy. Additionally in the case of unions, the leadership has long been perceived as corrupt, providing an additional disincentive for white collar workers to get involved. This, however, could be changing; grassroots movements to oust corrupt union leaders through elections, and to clean up corruption through internal

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reforms thereby bringing greater transparency to union business,\textsuperscript{14} are making strong inroads against the “mob” culture that clings to far too many unions such as the Teamsters.

It is possible to argue that the lack of grassroots movements to date has inhibited white collar unionism, as this type of movement contains several elements that appeal to the nature of white collar workers. Unfortunately, it is no guarantee that there will be a continued expansion of these types of efforts: grassroots movements face challenges of leadership and organization, especially in the face of the United States’ institutional norms and mobilization biases and the barriers that these norms present when it comes to organizing.\textsuperscript{15} Inherent in these leadership challenges is that the very autonomy prized by white collar workers and promised by grassroots movement is, as described by Richard Hyman, “a recipe for fragmentation of policy and action and is unlikely to lead spontaneously to inter-group solidarity.”\textsuperscript{16} In other words, the freedom and sense of self-help that comes with autonomy also brings a lack of coordination and ultimately a leadership vacuum. Unionism driven by grassroots movements contains a point at which it must evolve to a different form of organizing, like one of aforementioned forms in this chapter, or the movement itself will suffer.


CONCLUSION

White collar unionism in the United States has suffered for a multitude of reasons. Foremost among these reasons is a set of institutional norms, driven by inherent social values in this country, that long ago gave rise to mobilization biases which subtly discourage a robust labor movement. The nature of their occupation aside, white collar workers begin by facing barriers that any worker in this country faces when it comes to unionism. The social norm of possessive individualism means that workers are first and foremost concerned with themselves, and with attaining material wealth as a sign of class and status, rather than with acting collectively for a greater good. Additionally, the deep and abiding respect for the sanctity of property rights has never allowed for the development of a pervasive “us vs. them” mentality between workers and management, as these workers sympathize with and understand management’s desire to circumvent interference with their rights as owners. Our nation’s Protestant heritage engendered strong attitudes of self-help in many people, creating a culture of workers who are often unwilling to turn to unions – which they view as an unnecessary form of assistance. Indeed, the political underpinnings of the labor movement in America are rooted in conservative beliefs about the nature of the free market and a preference for less regulation. Taken all together, these mobilization biases make it difficult for any type of American worker to actively appreciate unionism, not just white collar workers, a difficult first hurdle to overcome even without considering the additional impediments unique to white collar workers.
White collar workers are different from blue collar workers, both in the type of work they do and in what they are expecting to gain from their working experience. They have resisted unionization, in part, because they do not see the necessity of it. To them, unions are for workers that do arduous and dangerous manual labor and require the protection of collective action. In truth, the labor movement has been slow to accept that the hazards of white collar work such as poor work-life balance, long hours and unfair compensation are issues worthy of resolving through the use of unions.

Moreover, the nature of white collar work has made it so that workers strongly identify with their occupation. White collar workers seek status through their type of work, which status often means more to them than financial concerns. Business unionism models that only address economistic goals therefore hold little appeal to many white collar workers. Owing to that disconnect, many white collar workers have found organizations that provide similar benefits to unions without actually being unions. The rise of quasi-unions, such as professional associations, are a response to the needs of white collar workers – and are also an answer to the difficulty arising from organizing an increasingly non-traditional workforce, which includes many more contingent and part-time workers than ever before.

White collar unionism has also been a victim of structural changes in the American economy. A move towards smaller, more efficient workplaces means that there is less of the traditional, hierarchical structure that unions were so effective at redressing. White collar workers often not only work in physical proximity to their bosses, they possess educational and training proximity, further breaking down traditional
employer-management barriers and foregoing the perception that a formal bargaining structure is needed. The deindustrialization of the economy and the rise of new technologies has further weakened existing labor relations models, meaning that as white collar workers enter the workforce in ever greater numbers, they are coming into an environment that neither wants nor needs unions. Globalization in particular has hardened the attitudes of private sector companies towards unions; these modern globally-oriented companies view unions as making labor costs prohibitively high, and inhibiting the flexibility necessary to compete in a global economy.

A particularly cogent reason for the lack of white collar unionism has been the rise of the human resource management model used by many firms in the private sector. By providing their employees with a voice and engaging them in the decision-making process, these firms both fill a role normally filled by unions and keep their employees engaged and satisfied, making it unlikely for employees to turn to unions for help. At the same time, it allows companies to maximize the utility of their employees, possibly reaping benefits from their knowledge and ideas that they may have otherwise overlooked.

White collar workers have also failed to unionize in great numbers due to the perceptions that they hold about unions. As unions are largely an “experience good,” and as most white collar workers have never been in a union nor has anyone in their social network, information about the benefits of unions is likely not being communicated to white collar workers. Since they aren’t gaining direct knowledge about unions, all they have left to base their opinions on is what they pick up from broader society and the
media. These widely-circulated perceptions includes ideas that workers that unionize are disloyal, that unions are corrupt, and that unions don’t offer any benefit to workers doing white collar work. Many of these misperceptions are the result of a media environment that has never looked favorably on unions, and that sensationalizes the negative aspects of unions which make good news stories.

Ultimately, the type of unionism that is most widely used in the United States impedes white collar workers’ desire to organize. Business unionism addresses some concerns of white collar workers, but not issues of status and identity that are so important to this class. A proposed move towards social movement unionism is also flawed, as the inherent radicalism goes against the conservative nature of labor relations in America. A return to the grassroots-movement model seems to hold some hope for white collar workers, as the participatory autonomy and ability to address many of the things that they see as problems in labor relations would speak to their identity as entrepreneurial individuals. Yet the leadership and sustainability issues surrounding grassroots movements make them unlikely to be a long-term solution.

It’s clear that there are many reasons explaining the lack of union participation on the part of white collar workers. Some may have greater effect, some less, but all of the reasons mentioned here certainly have played, and continue to play, a role inhibiting white collar unionism. It is equally clear that white collar workers alone are not to blame for the diminished labor movement in the United States. In fact, the opposite is likely true. White collar workers arose in great numbers at a time when the labor movement had started an unchecked decline as a result of a society with fundamental biases against
organized labor. It was possible for certain industries and workers to overcome these challenges for time and give the appearance of a robust labor movement, but the movement’s foundation was rotten and bound to crumble. It is undeniable that, by and large, white collar workers would stand to gain much by giving collective action a try. At the same time, many white collar workers have found perfectly acceptable alternatives and seem content with a lack of unionism. Organized labor would certainly benefit from a broader and more concerted engagement with white collar workers; as the example of the CWA proves, it is both possible and worthwhile. The participation of white collar workers alone, however, is not the panacea that will cure the ills of the labor movement.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


