

The American Labor Movement: From Exceptionalism to Example?

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Unions in the United States have led a troubled life. Compared to Europe and the Antipodes, unionism has never been a mass movement and an institutionalized part of American politics. Within some industries, such as the automobile industry, unions have had an impact and played a major role, but generally unions are not central. Union membership peaked in the 1960s when it reached one third of the labor force; today union membership is approximately thirteen per cent of the labor force, and the AFL-CIO estimate that 300,000 new members are needed every year to sustain the current membership level.

American labor history is often assumed to have little relevance for the more advanced European labor movements, but a more market-driven economy, structural changes in the labor market and multi-ethnic migration may indicate that there are lessons to learn from the American experience with regard to issues that are new in a European context. The American union experience is about functioning in a hostile political environment, in a rapidly changing economy and in a multiethnic labor market.

Van Gyes argues that unions have three key functions. The first is a democratic function, to ensure that human beings have some influence on their working lives. The second function is economic, to distribute financial means to workers. And the third function of unions is social, to

ensure social stability, social security and to fight social exclusion.¹ Traditionally all three aspects have been part of the *raison d'être* of unions in Europe and in the Antipodes, whereas American unions primarily have tried to ensure the economic aspects, leaving wider societal functions, such as the democratic and social obligations, to other actors and institutions.

Three important trends in the labor market have affected the roles that unions play. Firstly, due to a drop in traditionally male, blue-collar industries, resulting from a switch from secondary to service industries, the blue-collar worker is no longer the dominating worker, even though labor movement culture has remained blue-collar.² Secondly, there is an increasing proportion of female and ethnic minority workers. The heterogenization of the workforce means that identities other than class, such as race and gender, become increasingly important.³ A third important trend is the increasing pressure from management and governments to curtail union power.⁴

These changes challenge the three key functions of unions as outlined by Van Gyes, and these key functions may not be guaranteed in the future in Europe. The democratic function is challenged by global markets and by management reclaiming rights to key decision-making areas including more individualized contracts for workers. The economic function is challenged by the need to compete with low labor costs in other parts of the world and with the pressure of legal and illegal immigrant workers. The social function of unions is challenged by the increasing heterogeneity of the labor force and the population in general, which makes it increasingly difficult to define labor interests and to see labor markets in terms of two opposing groups, employers and workers. In recent decades conditions have become increasingly difficult for trade unions also outside the United States. European unions suffer from declining membership, legal restrictions⁵ and increasingly heterogeneous labor forces. With

1. Guy van Gyes, "Introduction: Modernisation of Trade Unions and Class Analysis," in Guy van Gyes, Hans de Witte, Patrick Pasture, eds., *Can Class Still Unite? The Differentiated Work Force, Class Solidarity and Trade Unions* (Ashgate, Aldershot, 2001), 3.

2. Andrew J. Richards, "The Crisis of Union Representation," in Van Gyes et al., 29.

3. Richards, 19-20; van Gyes, 5; Hoyt N. Wheeler, *The Future of the American Labor Movement* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002), 29-31.

4. Richards, 22-23.

5. Richards, 2.

the new challenges unions in Europe face new territory, and are confronted with challenges which are well known to their American counterparts.

The purpose of this article is to analyze some of the reasons for the low degree of unionization and the fragmentation that has characterized and continues to characterize the American labor movement, and to discuss the implications of the American lesson for European labor movements. The first section of the article provides a brief overview of labor movement history. The second section is a discussion of the various factors that have influenced labor organizations in America historically. The third section summarizes the challenges that American and European labor unions face and the lessons Europe can learn from American labor movement history.

1. Labor Movement History: A Brief Overview

Between 1790 and 1865 the United States became one of the two leading industrial nations in the world and in 1885 industrial production surpassed the English level. Most workers had little influence over their working lives, and squalor and poverty was widespread, even for people in employment.⁶ The first American unions were established early in the nineteenth century as crafts unions. They were mutual aid societies and their objective was to improve the wages, hours and working conditions of members of a particular trade and skill. The first real trade union – a merging of several journeymen's societies – was established in New York City in 1833.⁷

The Knights of Labor was established in 1869, initially as a secret society, with the purpose of changing the existing social order. The Knights sought to improve living conditions for working people through political reform and considered competition for survival an artificial,

6. Edward Pessen, "Builders of the Young Republic," in Richard Morris, ed., *A History of the American Worker* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 77; David Montgomery, "Labor in the Industrial Era," in Richard Morris, ed., 88.

7. Vernon M. Briggs, *Immigration and American Unionism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 21-22; Pessen, 48-66.

man-made condition.⁸ The Knights organized skilled and unskilled workers, all races and nationalities and both genders. The organization peaked in 1886 in terms of membership; then membership started to decline and it ceased to exist in the early twentieth century.⁹ The Knights met opposition, not just from employers, but also from other unions. They were reformers striving to improve the social, economic, and intellectual life of workers and they sought to abolish the wage system and create a new society based on solidarity. In contrast, other trade unions rejected broad reform, stressing organization by trade and trade solidarity, not class solidarity.

The American Federation of Labor (AFL) was established in 1886 replacing the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions.¹⁰ The AFL was an association of crafts unions. From the beginning the profile as an organization for unions of skilled workers was observed rigorously, and thus the AFL did not embrace people of all races and nationalities and strongly opposed immigration the way the Knights were doing. The AFL also rejected the social and political reforms advocated by the Knights. From the establishment in 1886 till 1924 the AFL was led by Samuel Gompers. Gompers was a powerful leader who shaped policies and influenced the AFL and the labor movement in terms of its structure and its strategies.¹¹ The year 1886 marked the parting of the ways for reform and trade unionism and the beginning of the particular American labor movement style, as the Knights of Labor withered away and trade unionism became American unionism. The Congress of Industrial Organisations (CIO) was established in 1937. It was a break-away group from the AFL that wanted to organize unskilled labor and to increase political activity. The two federations amalgamated in 1955 and became the AFL-CIO. Unskilled labor had been admitted but restrictions on immigration were still supported.¹² The AFL-CIO is an umbrella organization or the union of unions and today, the AFL-CIO has 66 member unions.¹³

8. Montgomery, 80.

9 Briggs, 38-39.

10. Gerald N. Grob, "Knights of Labor versus American Federation of Labor," in David Grob, ed., *The American Labor Movement* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 31-36; Montgomery, 109; Wheeler, 85-86.

11. www.afl-cio.org

12. Briggs, 117-122.

13. www.afl-cio.org.

2. Reasons for the Low Degree of Unionization

Between 1945 and 1994 America saw a reduction in the proportion of nonagricultural workers belonging to a union from 35.5 per cent to 15.5 per cent, and in 2002 union density had dropped further to 13.5 per cent.¹⁴ The explanations for this are a combination of internal and external factors, that is, factors which unions can control and factors outside union control, such as the political and economic context within which the unions have to operate.

These factors include mass immigration, racial and ethnic divisions, the ideology of individualism and entrepreneurship, as well as anti-union legislation. Anti-union legislation, anti-union court rulings and anti-union campaigns by employers have had a huge impact on unionization since the 19th century. The policies pursued by the national labor organizations, particularly the AFL, have also contributed to the special American variety of laborism. American unions have a history of conservatism and resistance to change.¹⁵ The following sections will discuss the factors that have contributed to the particularly American characteristics in labor union history, with a view to seeing the American experience as a possible example for European labor movements, as they are challenged on their democratic, economic and social functions.

Individualism and Entrepreneurism

The discourse and ideology of entrepreneurship have often been cited, from de Tocqueville onwards, as an important characteristic of American society. Liberalism has been a dominant ideology in America since the Revolution and liberal thought has prevailed in both the civil and the economic spheres. The belief in individualism and rights has been fundamental, and rights have almost always been demanded on an individual basis, not on a group basis. The belief in individualism and rights has been linked to a strong belief in the minimal state. There is a preference for non-involvement in social and economic affairs and state action has often been seen as not only undesirable, but unconstitutional and even

14. Hyunhee Kim, *Working Class Stratification and the Demand for Unions in the United States* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997), 3; Wheeler, xiii.

15. Kim, 5.

un-American. Social indignation has rarely been a dominant feeling in American politics and the idea of a right to social citizenship has been firmly rejected.¹⁶

People did not come to the United States to be workers; they came for economic opportunity, for the American Dream, and people who envisage themselves as self-made millionaires do not join unions. Americans have emphasized individual achievement rather than collective action. The American labor movement differs from other western labor movements in ideology, class solidarity tactics, organizational structure and leadership style. American unions are more conservative and more narrowly self-interested, more militant, more decentralized and have traditionally been less class conscious than European ones.¹⁷ The word "union" itself connotes class, and Linkon and Russo argue that "[g]iven this ideology [individualism, self-sufficiency] it's not surprising that many Americans see being working-class as a sign of personal failure rather than as a source for activism."¹⁸ Employers and society are suspicious of unions and many workers feel that they are better off without the union. Although unionized labor receives higher wages, by joining a union workers identify themselves as workers and the individual entrepreneurial dream is crushed.

Immigration

Immigration has been a contentious issue for American unions throughout their history. The size, the composition and the geographical distribution of the labor force have been changed repeatedly by immigration. Immigration has greatly affected the supply of labor and hence the strength of unions. America became a target for mass immigration around the same time that trade unions in both Europe and America began to organize and to build up a power base. Immigration has resulted in both problems and opportunities. Immigration has split the labor movement as

16. Lene Lindbjerg, *Liberalism and Social Policy in America and Australia*, unpublished PhD thesis (Institute of History, International and Social Studies, Aalborg University, 2002), 99-102, 172.

17. Sherry Linkon and John Russo, "Can Class Still Unite? Lessons from the American Experience," in van Gyes et al., 312; Seymour Martin Lipset, "Trade Unionism and the American Social Order," in David Brody, ed., *The American Labor Movement* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 7-14.

18. Linkon and Russo, 312.

it has split the general public and the elite, but opposition to Asian immigration united almost all union leaders in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. After World War I the AFL supported a quota system for different nationalities that favored European immigration and tried to limit the number of Chinese immigrants.¹⁹

Along with widespread racism and prejudice on the part of union members, immigration was for a long time a disruptive factor in the labor market. The vast majority of the immigrants who arrived between 1880 and 1920 were either unskilled or tradesmen: they were overwhelmingly blue-collar workers. The immigrants fulfilled a demand for manpower from American employers in the growing industrial sector, but they did complicate matters for the people who tried to organize American workers and work towards decent wages and working conditions. Since the 1850s America has had a labor surplus which has a) depressed wages, and b) halted an on-going unionization process, and hence affected the living and working conditions of workers. Union membership was high when the first wave of immigration began but then membership began to decline. The constant pattern in America for 150 years has been that a rise in immigration has resulted in a decline in union membership and a reduction in the number of immigrants has allowed unions to increase their membership. When union membership peaked in 1965 at just over 30 per cent, the percentage of foreign-born workers was at 4.4 per cent, the lowest in American history. Since the mid-1960s union membership has declined to the present 13 per cent while immigration, especially illegal immigration has increased dramatically.²⁰

However, at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century second-wave immigrants infused activism into the American labor movement and were in many cases instrumental in establishing unions and improving conditions. They came to America at the time when the labor movement was taking shape in the latter half of the nineteenth century and brought ideas of working-class solidarity and organization from Europe. German skilled workers were the driving force in organizing workers in printing, cigar making and in breweries. Irish workers were behind the organization of shoe-makers in New England,

19. Philip Taft, "Workers of a New Century," in Morris, ed., 137.

20. Briggs, 25-27, 81, 124-141.

and Jews from Russia and Eastern Europe were influential in organizing workers in the garment industry in New York.²¹ But despite the positive impact some ethnic groups have had in terms of organizing certain industries, race and ethnicity have, more often than not, been divisive factors among workers.

A Fragmented Labor Force: Race, Ethnicity, Religion and Gender

The reluctance of unions and members to accept people of races, ethnicities and religions other than white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants is another explanation for the weakness of American unions. Many unions were exclusively for workers of a particular race or religion, because members were unwilling to organize with people from other races or religions. Anglo workers refused to be in the same unions as blacks and as Catholics from Ireland, Poland or Italy. Scandinavians and Germans were generally acceptable.

In the early decades of the 19th century blacks worked as sail makers, shoemakers, tailors, carpenters etc., but white immigrants, especially the Irish, pushed them to lower and unskilled functions on the labor market.²² Later on the Irish were displaced by the Italians. A constant surplus of labor added to the tendency of hiring kin, neighbors and countrymen²³ and white workers often felt they had a right to jobs before other ethnic groups. Unions in the North did not support abolitionism because they saw their members' conditions as just as appalling as slave conditions, and because they feared competition from cheap labor.²⁴ From the mid-nineteenth century there was an extensive use of African Americans as strike-breakers, and this tendency lasted until the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s. Nelson argues that for African Americans, rejected by unions, strikes and war were often the only ways of gaining a foothold in the labor market.²⁵

21. John H. M. Laslett, *Labor and the Left: A Study of Socialist and Radical Influences in the American Labor Movement, 1881-1924* (Basic Books, New York, 1970), 9-15, 54-73, 98-135.

22. Bruce Nelson, *Divided We Stand: American Workers and the Struggle for Black Equality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 13.

23. *Ibid.*, 16.

24. Briggs, 35-36.

25. Nelson, 19.

Internal migration in the United States also disrupted labor market balances and added to the animosities within the working class. During the recession of the late 1920s and 1930s more than one million poor workers from rural areas, mainly in Oklahoma, hence the name Okies, migrated to California. The migrants were met with opposition from Californian workers because they undercut the wage level, but they were also courted by unions and the Democratic Party because they could shift the political balance of the state.²⁶ Also, between 1940 and 1970 five million African Americans left the rural South for the urban North, adding another identity group to the competing racial and ethnic groups in the cities.²⁷

Black migrants from the South had no union experience and that, combined with employment discrimination, made them "more susceptible to strikebreaking than white workers" and caused hostility between workers.²⁸ An estimated 30,000 blacks worked as strikebreakers during the 1919 Great Steel Strike. The unions lost the strike partly because employers were able to use immigrant and African American workers. This undermined not only the strike but also ended a growth period for unions. The interesting thing about the Great Steel Strike is that, contrary to the myth, it was so-called foreigners who were the back-bone of the strike, not the "white American" workers.²⁹

In the early 20th century many unions had white-only clauses, and some were reluctant to address the issue of racial discrimination because they feared negative reactions from members. Skilled, native-born, old-immigrant workers tended to see themselves as "American" and "white" and did not identify with more recent immigrants, whom they saw as "foreigners" and "not white." This resulted in rigid dividing lines within the working class. Anglo-Saxon workers had both material and psychological reasons for maintaining these dividing lines.³⁰ According to Bernstein AFL crafts unions often denied membership to blacks and the AFL

26. James Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 84, 90.

27. Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How it Changed America* (Vintage Books, New York), 1991.

28. Taft, 138.

29. Briggs, 72; Nelson, 158-165.

30. *Ibid.*, xxxi-xxxv, 92, 150.

could not or would not prevent racist practices by affiliated unions.³¹ Some black leaders, like Booker T. Washington, believed blacks should form alliances with the employers against unions and white workers. This type of argument was used as justification for racist policies by some union leaders. The CIO did organize black workers, although some of its local branches excluded them. But ultimately it was the success of the CIO that caused the AFL to abandon its racist practices in the late 1940s.³²

The widely practiced exclusion of ethnic minorities made unions considerably weaker because they handed employers a reserve pool of labor that could be brought in during industrial disputes. Beyond this, employers also actively sought to maintain dividing lines by establishing segregated company athletic teams, choirs and other cultural activities.³³ These activities prevented civil-life activities outside the realm of the company and made sure that workers had little social contact despite sharing a common workplace. Mutual assistance societies were created along ethnic and community lines, and not according to employment or socio-economic factors.³⁴ Workers often had strong connections to other organizations and interest groups which they sometimes needed to consult with in industrial matters, such as religious groups (e.g. the Catholic church), the NAACP and other civil rights groups, the Communist Party, ethnic community groups and women's groups. Resulting from exclusion there were unions for specific racial ethnic or racial groups, such as the National Negro Congress, the National Conference of Negro Organizations, the Afro-American Labor Protective Society and the Negro American Labor Council. The rejection of ethnic workers by unions, workers' loyalties toward their own ethno-cultural background and employers' policies prevented workers from developing one common identity and interest base.

Since the 1960s discrimination against African Americans has diminished, but far from disappeared. Today African Americans are more inclined to join unions than European Americans, and this inclination is influenced by factors such as discrimination, lower educational attain-

31. Irving Bernstein, "Americans in Depression and War," in Morris, ed., 172.

32. Ray Marshall, "Unions and the Black Community," in Brody, ed., 139-145.

33. Nelson, 176.

34. Montgomery, 86-87.

ment, differentiated housing markets and unequal labor market opportunities. This is a much more political perception of trade unions, one that resembles the way unions have been used in Europe: as a political tool in the struggle for better living conditions, for a more equitable distribution of the goods of society and for social solidarity. European Americans, on the other hand, are much more influenced by workplace factors, such as working hours, wages and safety regulation, in their evaluation of the benefits derived from union membership.³⁵

Historically, race and ethnicity have been two of the most important dividing factors within the American labor movement, but other factors cause divisions as well. Gender is one of them. Kim finds that female workers are more likely to join unions than male workers, and do so for different reasons, because of differences between the genders in terms of status, industrial history, treatment by unions, as well as gendered social roles.³⁶ Other factors that influence willingness to join unions are the tradition for unionization within specific sectors or industries, geographical region, and age.³⁷ The South has traditionally been a region of low union density, whereas the North East has had a strong union tradition.

Legislation, Courts and Employers

Unions have also met direct and powerful opposition from the court system, employers and anti-union legislation. The courts in America have a long history of union hostility. In 1806, following a strike in Philadelphia, a court established that the forming of unions for economic gains was criminal conspiracy. However, in 1842 the Supreme Court reversed the criminal conspiracy doctrine and declared that unions established to better the financial situations of their members were legal. In the 1820s union activity was increasing and many unions emphasized their loyalty to employers and argued that the welfare of craftsmen was to the benefit of the entire community. In this decade the world's first labor party was formed in Philadelphia, although it only lasted about a decade.³⁸

35. Kim, 83-84, 101-102.

36. *Ibid.*, 78.

37. *Ibid.*, 49.

38. Briggs, 22-24.

In 1890 Congress passed the Sherman Anti-Trust Act against business monopolies and in 1895 America saw the first of many attempts to apply the law to trade unions.³⁹ In the 1920s employers and politicians alike argued that business was what America was all about and that unions tried to destroy this spirit. Unionism was a foreign threat to the American way. The National Association of Employers called their open-shop campaign the American Plan, implying that a closed-shop was un-American. The campaign was intended to weaken unions by spreading membership across different competing organizations. The open-shop campaign managed to limit union membership, as intended. In 1920 there were five million, and in 1923 there were 3.6 million union members. Some companies established corporate unions that had no contact with outside unions, and employers hired professional strikebreakers, used terror, intimidation, black-listing, spies and "missionaries" to prevent workers from joining unions.⁴⁰

In this period, the early part of the 20th century, the courts also struck down on union activities and basically removed all union exemptions from the anti-trust law. In 1932 unions finally achieved the statutory right to organize and to bargain collectively. This was upheld by the Supreme Court in 1938. But the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act restrained union activities by making closed shops and jurisdictional strikes illegal and by limiting collective bargaining. The 1959 Landrum-Griffin Act further limited union activities. It was a bill of rights for union members that limited the powers of organizations and leaders. Its main target was James Hoffa and the Teamsters.⁴¹ Business has historically been and continues to be the most powerful interest segment in America and it is far stronger than other groups, including unions, in terms of finance and organization⁴² and hence secures considerable political and judicial influence.

Still today, after 150 years of union activity, employer opposition remains a major obstacle. Wheeler calls anti-union legislation and employer action "[a]n organized attack on labor, mounted by a powerful antiunion movement in the business community and tolerated by the

39. *Ibid.*, 51.

40. *Ibid.*, 110-112; Taft, 120, 136.

41. Kim, 24; Jack Barbash, "Unions and Rights in the Space Age," in Morris, ed., 188-198.

42. William R. Nester, *A Short History of American Industrial Policies* (London: Macmillan, 1998), 31.

law,"⁴³ and argues that it is the most important reason for the decline in unionization in the last couple of decades. Kim equally argues that "employer hostility or resistance has become a major obstacle to unionization in the United States."⁴⁴ The American labor market has become increasingly individualized during the past thirty years and nothing at the moment indicates changes in employers' or legislators' attitudes. A basic unwillingness to accept employees' collective interests and action persists. The result is that there are many more strike days in America than in Europe. American unions are more likely to fight long and hard conflicts than their European counterparts because they are more vulnerable and the threats against them are much more serious. There are no collective employer organizations to enter into agreements with,⁴⁵ very little leverage against employers and law-makers, and very little social protection against income and security losses.

Labor Union Agency

Arguably, the American environment has not been conducive to the establishment of a strong labor movement, but many divisions among workers were exacerbated by union policies. Unions are not only victims; their agency has played an important role in creating the particular American brand of unionism. From its founding the intention of AFL was to organize skilled labor, and unskilled workers were ignored. This policy added to the complicated divisions within the American working class. At the same time there were vast regional variations in the workforce, in the level of industrialization and types of industry, which, together with the rejection of unskilled labor and non-white labor meant that unions were an unknown feature in some, mainly rural, areas. Unions could undoubtedly have had a much stronger base had they organized unskilled workers from the early years of unionism. The CIO was established in protest against AFL refusal to organize unskilled labor, and with the CIO many of the dividing lines were actually eroded, including a great deal of prejudice. The CIO not only organized unskilled labor, they also reached

43. Wheeler, 3.

44. Kim, 148.

45. James A Piazza, *Going Global: Unions and Globalization in the United States, Sweden, and Germany* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2002), 93, 125.

out to black workers, something the AFL had almost never done.⁴⁶ Union policies had aggravated already existing lines of division in terms of race and skill rather than trying to break them down.

The social wage has never played any importance in the American labor movement partly because America has not had a strong Labor party that could take social wage claims into the political arena. Part of the reason lies with the parties on the left themselves, inasmuch as the socialist parties of the late 19th century failed to work together and develop mass appeal.⁴⁷ Another part of the reason for the lack of a labor party must be sought in the labor movement itself. Samuel Gompers, the first president of the AFL, held a leading position in the American trade union movement in the 1880s and has been one of the most influential American labor leaders ever. He was president of the AFL from 1886 till 1924 and established some of the principles that guided the AFL and affiliated unions not only during his presidency, but also in the time after. Gompers' ideas and policies established structures that remain with the American labor union movement today.

Gompers firmly believed unions should be self-sufficient in order to achieve better conditions.⁴⁸ To Gompers the Socialist Party and trade unions were two different things that differed inherently in their methods. From the early years, AFL political activities were issue oriented, not party or ideologically oriented, and socialists sometimes accused Gompers and other leaders of selling out to the capitalist politicians.⁴⁹ These early policies were in many ways decisive and were to establish a high degree of path dependency. To Samuel Gompers and the AFL the American environment was not suitable for a labor party, because American workers were not as class conscious as Europeans and because American workers had been given the right to vote in the first decades following independence. Gompers believed that workers did not want party politics, they wanted better wages.

The term Gompers used to describe this kind of unionism was Pure and Simple. It also became known as "business unionism," "Bread-and-

46. Nelson, 158, 181.

47. James Weinstein, *The Decline of Socialism in America 1912-1925* (Vintage Books, New York, 1967); John H. M. Laslett, "Socialism and the American Labor Movement," in Brody, ed.

48. Stuart Bruce Kaufman, *Samuel Gompers and the Origins of the American Federation of Labor 1884-1896* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1973), xi.

49. *Ibid.*, 121-128.

Butter unionism” or “realism,” and still today nearly all American unions are characterized as Pure and Simple unions. Their focus is on the membership base, finance and the needs that arise directly from work. America has seen few examples of militant, reformist, cooperatist or social democratic unions. This is in contrast to Western Europe, where social democratic unionism resulted in the institutionalization of democratic work processes and in social reforms through legislation.⁵⁰ The emphasis on Bread-and-Butter rather than social change often made union leaders see themselves as “profit-oriented businessmen”⁵¹ and not as social reformers. Gompers’ successor Green (1924-1952) stressed that organized labor was an auxiliary service to business and should hence support capitalism.⁵² In concrete terms Bread-and-Butter unionism means that it was, and still is, acceptable to fight for better wages, a shorter working day, better safety regulations, employment security etc., but that the social wage is not part of the union agenda. This means that unions should not fight for better housing, sanitation, day-care facilities, good schools and other aspects of life outside the factory that improve the living conditions of working people. Today 43 million Americans have no health insurance, parents find it difficult to work because of inadequate day-care and millions are homeless. These are areas that American unions have decided not to get involved in and most union executives uphold this policy, although some are beginning to question it.

There is no doubt that American unions have been conservative and employer friendly at times, rejecting social changes, but this cannot merely be attributed to the ideological disposition of the AFL and affiliated unions. Bread-and-butter may have been the way to establish and consolidate unions in the particular American environment which is anything but conducive to the three union objectives outlined by van Gyes. The narrow focus may have been a strategy for survival, a realistic appraisal of the political and ideological situation in America. A labor union movement fighting for democratic participation for workers and for social security and solidarity might not have lasted long in America, with its exceptional emphasis on entrepreneurship and individualism.

50. Wheeler, 19-22, 49, 145-146; Briggs, 62; Brody, ed., 1.

51. Lipset, 21.

52. Briggs, 112.

Other union strategies of the past have had a decisive impact on labor history, including the highly decentralized American organizational principle. Corruption in American unions is more prevalent than elsewhere. Union representatives are based at the local level and deal directly with municipal inspectors and local businessmen, and that has raised the risk of undetected corruption. In the case of American unions decentralization of power has therefore facilitated corruption. Decentralization has furthermore weakened the national unions because there have been no clear powers over member unions, and it has also resulted in large union bureaucracies, with many more salaried union employees relative to membership than European unions have. Furthermore, there is a tradition of eliminating critical voices and of not including members in democratic decision-making.⁵³

3. Lessons from America

The picture drawn here of the American labor movement is one of geographical dispersal, great varieties between industries in terms of tradition and unionization, ethnic and racial divisions, caused by prejudice but also by racial and ethnic concentrations in certain industries, gender differences as well as the catch-22 situation that a large proportion of the labor force, the illegal workers, cannot be organized because they do not formally exist. This diverse "movement" exists in an environment that hails the individual rather than the group and entrepreneurship rather than solidarity; an environment that sees the idea of labor unions as a rejection of the very principles that environment is based on.

As stated above, the reasons for the difficulties American unions have had in establishing themselves are both internal and external. Historically, unions have not merely been the victims of a hostile environment that tried to crush them at whatever cost. The liberal orthodoxy is strong and industrial power is formidable, but if American unions do not overcome their internal conflicts they are bound to all but disappear. Unions

53. Wheeler, 3; Kim 146; Lipset, 28; Andrew J. Richards, "The Crisis of Union Representation," in van Gyes et al., 32; John T. Dunlop, "The Bargaining Table," in Morris, ed., 215.

are squeezed by the system but their agency cannot be denied.⁵⁴ Unions have been part of the problem with their policies of division. Divisions in terms of skill, and divisions in terms of race, ethnicity and gender. The rejection of the social wage may also have been damaging, because social problems have an impact on workers' employability.

At the moment union membership has been in decline for nearly 40 years, and membership is becoming so low that the question of whether unions can survive in America needs to be addressed.⁵⁵ Wheeler argues that two things are needed for labor movement renewal.⁵⁶ Firstly, a central unifying idea, and here Wheeler points to the importance of unionism as a democratic institution supporting the basic idea that human beings should have influence over matters that affect them. Secondly, unions need to incorporate the interests of a heterogeneous workforce.

Immigrant workers and illegals have made up a contingent workforce that unions have ignored or even fought, but that they are now beginning to reach. Millions of illegal Hispanics work in service jobs for little money and without pension schemes or medical insurance. Despite illegal workers' vulnerable position some argue that workers in the labor market need protection from the impact of the reserve labor pool that illegal workers make up.⁵⁷ In 1996 the number of female and non-white union members exceeded the number of white male members, forcing the AFL-CIO to pay more attention to the diversity of its members.⁵⁸ In 2000 the AFL-CIO executive committee decided to reverse its century-long policy on immigration. The congress announced that the AFL-CIO would support immigration and activities that try to meet the special needs of immigrants, and that they would try to unionize illegal immigrants.⁵⁹ They also called for a general amnesty for illegal workers.

A current trend is the emergence of workers' rights organizations. These are organizations that provide assistance and consultancy to unions, and that have broader social and democratic goals than traditional Bread-and-Butter unionism.⁶⁰ Unions are beginning to focus on issues of

54. See Nelson.

55. Wheeler, 3.

56. *Ibid.*, 200-201.

57. Briggs, 179; Kim, 147.

58. Linkon and Russo, 312.

59. Briggs, 4, 167.

60. Wheeler, 116.

identity in order to incorporate different experiences based not just on class, but on gender, race or ethnicity and this may reverse the decline.⁶¹ The future of unions in America lies in accepting diversity, and in organizing immigrants, ethnic minorities and women. Not only are there new workers with different needs than the traditional white, male, blue-collar worker, they are in different types of jobs as they are predominantly service workers, not industrial workers. Service workers often work alone, not in large groups together, and their working conditions are not as easy to survey. Safety hazards in industrial sites are more easy to detect than working conditions for service workers. Important issues for workers in the twenty-first century are about working and meeting the demands of parenthood at the same time, or about demeaning treatment, as well as under-payment. However, any rhetoric that launches a massive critique of the economic system or hints at dismantling central American political institutions, as unions did in the formative years in the late 19th century in Europe and Australia, will probably not succeed. Embracing immigrants may be a way to make a difference in the lives and initiate social change.

Globalization, immigration and new economic structures cause European and American labor markets to be increasingly similar, and class, identity and multiculturalism are reexamined by unions in both America and Europe.⁶² The social democratic Nordic model is moving away from distributional issues such as the solidaristic wage policy and centralized settlements, because of pressures for greater flexibility due to international competition.⁶³ European unions remain largely in the social democratic tradition but are increasingly moving towards American style Bread-and-Butter unionism.⁶⁴ The political environment still safeguards basic union rights but erosions are happening in many countries, and together with economic restructuring, more service industry, and changing demographics in Europe, it seems clear that there are important lessons for European unions to learn from American unionism. One of the most important lessons is not to underestimate the impact of diversity and to include a variety of identities and issues in union policies.⁶⁵

61. Linkon and Russo, 318; Kim, 78-79; Bruce Nissen, "The Role of Labor Education in Transforming a Union Toward Organizing Immigrants: A Case Study," *Journal of Labor Studies* 27:1 (2002): 109-127.

62. Linkon and Russo, 312.

63. Piazza, 99.

64. Wheeler, 170.

65. Linkon and Russo, 314.

Because of its fragmented labor force, ethnic and cultural divisions, constant immigration of workers with different educational and labor market experiences, and a hostile political environment, America has a rich pool of experiences that are largely unknown to European trade unions. With the changes European labor markets are going through, the American experience is becoming less exceptional. America may therefore serve as a useful example for other Western labor movements as European labor markets are increasingly beginning to resemble labor market relations in America, with increasing ethnic diversity, with declining union membership rates, and with an increasingly hostile political environment.

The three key functions of labor unions, the democratic function, the economic function and the social function are challenged as they have always been in America, and they seem increasingly difficult to maintain. If the three functions are to remain key functions in the twenty-first century, unions in Europe – and America – may have to rethink their organization and their traditional policies, to try to appeal more to new workers, such as immigrants and the young, who experience an entirely different labor market from the previous generation. With an increasingly heterogeneous work force, and with a labor market that requires flexibility from workers, unions of the twenty-first century will have to accommodate the needs of a changing labor market with a heterogeneous workforce increasingly engaged in intermittent employment, as opposed to life-long employment by one employer. That is a situation that is newer to European workers than it is to American workers, but it is a challenge to unions in all parts of the post-industrial world.