

Reading One

Why Unions Matter

Few young workers entering the workforce today will start with union jobs. However, many more may be interested in joining or organizing a union, according to recent polls.

A union is a group of two or more workers who join together to have a voice in their workplace. By organizing, workers are able to engage their employer in negotiations over issues that concern them, such as better wages and benefits like health insurance and vacation time, safe working conditions, and equity and respect on the job. Many unions see themselves not only as representing members' immediate interests, but as part of a wider movement for social justice, including racial equity, immigrants' rights, and economic justice for all workers, whether they are organized or not.

Although union members once [made up](#) 35% percent of the workforce, today only 11% of U.S. workers belong to unions—in large part due to a concerted effort by employers to suppress organizing drives, remove unions from their workplaces, and enact laws that make unionization difficult.

And yet, support for unions has grown in recent years, with some 65 percent of Americans saying they approve of unions. Support is highest among young people—[71 percent](#) say they approve of unions, according to a 2020 Gallup poll.

Young workers may have good reason to be interested in unions. As a report by the U.C. Berkeley Center for Labor Research and Education [explains](#), unions play a central role in leveling the playing field between employees and their bosses:

A union is a group of workers who have organized themselves for mutual aid and collective action. It is a tool developed by and for working people, to provide them with a collective voice in their place of employment and in the broader society. Like any tool, it can be used well, badly, or not at all. Used properly, a union provides workers with a means to improve their lives in many ways.

Unions bring working people increased pay and benefits, and legal, legislative, and political remedies addressing the issues workers and their families care about: secure jobs and safe communities; necessary social services like public education, health care, and public safety; and a measure of support in old age through employee pension plans and advocacy for government programs such as Social Security and Medicare.

The reason why workers need unions boils down to this: employers have far more power than workers do, especially if workers have to negotiate with them over wages and working conditions as individuals.... By forming unions, workers gain the power that comes with being part of a group created for collective action. As a group, workers can negotiate with their employers with greater chance of success than they can as individuals.

https://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/pdf/2013/Work_Money_and_Power.pdf

Over the past century, the efforts of organized labor unions have produced many benefits that we now take for granted. Unions have been key in advancing the Fight for 15 campaign to raise the minimum

wage, as well as in struggles for immigrant rights, voting rights, and increased funding for public education. As the advocacy group Jobs With Justice [argues](#):

It's easy to forget that unions fought for many of the protections we take for granted in today's workplaces: the minimum wage, the eight-hour workday, child labor laws, health and safety standards, and even the weekend. Today, unions across the country are still on the frontlines advocating for basic workplace reforms like increases in the minimum wage and mandatory paid sick leave.

Studies show that a large union presence in an industry or region can raise wages even for non-union workers.

<https://www.jwj.org/unions-101>

While the composition and character of organized labor is continually fluctuating, young people will be critical in determining the future of unions. As Teen Vogue contributing writer Kaylen Ralph [wrote](#) in a December 2019 article:

While overall union membership rates have declined over the past three decades, the youngest cohort of U.S. workers have injected the workforce with renewed energy for organizing. In 2017, more than 75% of the net new union members added to the ranks industry-wide were under the age of 35, according to the Center for Economic and Policy Research.

As more young people find themselves stuck in precarious jobs with variable hours and benefits, some are turning to unions to help secure their rights. Just look at the recent swelling of support for unionization in "new" industries such as digital media, white-collar tech, and nonprofits.

<https://www.teenvogue.com/story/what-know-rights-union>

Given that unions have secured a higher quality of life for many Americans over the past century, and their role in advancing social and economic justice more broadly, it is not surprising that interest in unions is growing.

For Discussion

1. How much of the material in this reading was new to you, and how much was already familiar? Do you have any questions about what you read?
2. According to the reading, what have workers gained by joining or creating unions? How have organized workers and their unions contributed to historic changes in working conditions in the United States?
3. Why have unions lost members?
4. Have you ever known anyone in a union? Is anyone in your family a union member? What has been their experience?
5. If you are currently working, do you know if there is a union at your workplace?
6. Would you be interested in joining or organizing a union in the future? Why or why not?

Reading Two

Can Young Workers Forge New Unions in Today's Economy?

During the current Biden administration, the labor movement has enjoyed strong support from the White House. In particular, the administration supports the Protect the Right to Organize Act (the [PRO Act](#)), which would strengthen federal laws aimed at making it easier for workers to form unions.

As reporters Noah Bierman and David Lauter [explained](#) in a June article for the Los Angeles Times, President Biden sees unions as having a central role in promoting shared economic prosperity:

Biden's administration may be the most overtly pro-union since Harry Truman left the Oval Office nearly 70 years ago, labor leaders and outside analysts say.

It's a measure of just how formidable the hurdles are for unions in the U.S. that even with such support from the White House, many of organized labor's top priorities face long odds:

An effort this year to organize warehouse workers at an Amazon facility in Alabama failed badly, despite a video Biden recorded supporting efforts to beat back what he called "anti-union propaganda." The AFL-CIO's top legislative goal — a long-stalled rewrite of federal labor law to make organizing easier — remains stuck in the 50-50 Senate.....

Although polls show unions with a more positive image now than at any point in nearly two decades, the share of the workforce that belongs to a union has continued to plummet.... Reversing that trend forms a key part of the Biden administration's answer to a question that has vexed policymakers: Why have wages for average Americans stagnated for most of the last 30 years, while corporate profits and wealth at the top have swelled?

<https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2021-06-02/biden-pro-union-can-he-reverse-labors-long-decline>

Unions have traditionally been associated with industrial and manufacturing jobs—like autoworkers, miners, or workers in steel factories. But today it is public sector workers (those working for the federal, state, or local government) who are [most likely to be unionized](#). Educators, nurses and other healthcare workers, transportation workers, telecom workers, restaurant, and hotel workers have long been a powerful force in the labor movement. Black workers are more likely to be organized than white workers.

Young workers are changing what the labor movement looks like. As contributing writer Michelle Chen reported in a June 2018 article for The Guardian:

The hard hats and smokestacks of yesteryear are making room for tablets and tweets as the labor movement gets a millennial upgrade. One in four new hires was unionized last year, of nearly 860,000. An era of inequality... has begun to galvanize frustration among a generation often dismissed as self-absorbed. Now hyper-networked millennials are rediscovering the potential of organized labor to seed economic empowerment at work.

Young workers have realized that “a generation of corporate-driven policy choices have decimated the rights and economic security of working people,” according to Liz Shuler, secretary-treasurer of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), the largest federation of US labor unions. [Shuler now heads the federation, following the death of former president Rich Trumka in August 2021.] “The millennial and Gen Z generations are more civic minded and acutely in tune with the power of collective action ... a union card helps them leverage their power.”

Even the ivory tower is embracing worker solidarity. Graduate students at Columbia University recently staged a week-long strike for official recognition of their new union of teaching and research assistants, historically not treated as regular employees. Though the administration has resisted contract negotiations, organizers are building momentum on campus, while a nationwide movement to organize student workers is growing. ...

The re-energization of labor parallels other youth-powered activism. Young community activists have bolstered worker-driven protest movements from Occupy [Wall Street] to the Fight for \$15 to #MeToo, linking issues of living wages, labor protections and social justice. And younger “gig” industries have spawned organizing campaigns and legal battles to expand labor protections in sectors such as ridesharing apps, retail, and computer programming.

Some fresh blood is long overdue for a union movement grown anemic since the 1970s, strafed by globalization, automation, and right-wing rollbacks on union protections.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/29/can-millennials-save-unions-in-america>

Millennial writer Jamie Lynne Burgess [contends](#) that young people will have the chance to refashion the labor movement and build unions that speak to the unique social and economic challenges facing rising generations. In a June 2019 article for Rewire.org, she writes:

Knowing that our work and financial lives will be much different [than what our parents experienced](#), millennials have been forced to adapt. In many cases, adapting has meant piecing together side gigs and extra jobs. It's easy to feel alone in the gig economy, or even feel in competition with your fellow workers.....

We millennials can be both disdainful of being forced to go it alone, and oddly proud of our hustle. Joining a union means embracing solidarity and leaving that pride behind, which can be especially hard when you're raised on a strict diet of American individualism.

Yet, as we try to find a path to retirement, millennials and unions have been called a “match made in heaven” by the [California Labor Federation](#).

“Some may think that unions are a thing of the past, but as reports pile up on how young workers are going to need to work themselves into exhaustion just to put food on the table, joining a union remains the best way for millennials to reap the kind of economic security their parents and grandparents had,” Alexandra Catsoulis wrote for the California Labor Federation.

Union membership [peaked in 1970](#) and has been declining ever since. Whether or not unions can adapt quickly enough will determine if they grow in the next generation, [said Zane Dalal, executive vice president of the [union benefits administrator BPA](#)]....

Millennials have a unique opportunity to contribute to labor unions and, in turn, contribute to change in many sectors. There are issues specific to this age group and this cultural moment that unions could address if young folks pushed for it, Dalal said.

Unions could advocate for [student loan repayment](#) policies, as our collective debt continues climbing. They could also become involved in the opioid crisis, he said, pushing for recovery support.

<https://www.rewire.org/younger-workers-labor-unions/>

The unions of the next generation may look different than those of today's labor movement, but as long as young workers are coming together to take collective action around their economic and political futures, these organizations will continue to have an important role in shaping working life in America.

For Discussion

1. How much of the material in this reading was new to you, and how much was already familiar? Do you have any questions about what you read?
2. According to the reading, what are some of the factors attracting young workers to the labor movement?
3. The reading mentions that on average, young people enjoy much less job security as compared with previous generations, and that the rise of the "gig economy" has made work more temporary and uncertain. How do you think these factors affect young peoples' attitudes towards unions?
4. How might the unions of today look different than those of the past? What new ideas or approaches do you think that your generation might bring to the labor movement?