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Union Decline and Prospects for Revival: Editors' Introduction

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1. Introduction

Trade union decline is a world-wide phenomenon. Although union influence remains strong in a number of nations, and especially northern Europe, most have witnessed a fall in union membership, on which this influence ultimately depends (see Table 1). In the developed world, only Sweden and Canada appear to have had relatively stable density levels, and even the latter has seen some decline in recent years. In the developing world there have been more exceptions (e.g. South Africa and Chile), but in most cases this has reflected the emergence of less repressive political and economic regimes, and hence density increases may reflect pent-up demand.

This change in the status of unions strikes at the heart of the field of industrial relations. It is causing researchers once again to ask fundamental questions about the future of unions, such as: Are unions outmoded institutions that arose out of the industrial revolution and grew to prominence and power in response to the economic and social conditions of the industrial economies of the twentieth century but are ill-suited to the economies, societies and workers of today? Or is the decline in unions likely to be reversed in the near term? If so, will the unions of the future be mirror images of those of the past and will the processes by which unions reverse their declines mirror the organizing models and histories of the past? Or will the organizing processes and organizational forms, strategies and roles of unions also change in significant ways?

Academic research has a vital role to play in answering these questions. Indeed, industrial relations researchers have responded in recent years by studying the causes and nature of the trends in union decline, the demand for or interest in union membership in the contemporary work-force, the

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TABLE 1
Union Densities in Selected Countries since 1980

Country	*Year*	*Union density (%)*	*Year*	*Union density (%)*	*% change*
Africa					
Egypt	1985	38.9	1995	29.6	−23.9
Kenya	1985	41.9	1995	16.9	−59.6
Mauritius	1985	34.8	1995	25.9	−25.7
South Africa	1985	15.5	1995	21.8	40.7
Uganda	1989	7.8	1995	3.9	−49.9
Zambia	1985	18.8	1995	12.5	−33.5
Zimbabwe	1985	11.6	1995	13.9	20.1
Asia					
Australia	1980	47.2	1995	28.6	−39.4
China	1981	55.9	1995	68.8	23.1
Hong Kong	1980	19.0	1994	21.0	10.5
India	1980	18.2	1993	18.9	3.8
Japan	1980	31.1	1995	23.9	−23.1
Korea	1980	15.5	1995	12.7	−18.0
New Zealand	1980	53.5	1995	23.2	−56.6
Singapore	1980	26.8	1995	15.6	−41.8
Taiwan	1980	26.2	1995	50.1	91.2
Europe					
Finland	1980	69.8	1995	59.7	−14.5
France	1980	17.6	1995	6.1	−65.3
Germany	1980	35.6	1995	29.6	−16.9
Ireland	1980	52.7	1993	36.0	−31.7
Italy	1980	44.1	1994	30.6	−30.6
Norway	1980	55.7	1995	51.7	−7.2
Sweden	1980	78.0	1994	77.2	−1.0
Switzerland	1980	31.1	1994	20.0	−35.7
United Kingdom	1980	48.6	1995	26.2	−46.1
North America					
Canada	1980	33.2	1993	31.0	−6.7
Mexico	1989	54.1	1991	31.0	−42.7
United States	1980	21.1	1995	12.7	−39.8
South America					
Argentina	1986	48.7	1995	25.4	−47.9
Chile	1985	11.6	1993	15.9	37.2
Colombia	1985	11.2	1995	7.0	−37.3
Costa Rica	1985	22.9	1995	13.1	−42.6
Venezuela	1988	25.9	1995	14.9	−42.5

Sources: ILO (1998); Visser (1993).

consequences of union decline on labour market outcomes and the alternative strategies that unions and other organizations are using or might use to stimulate a revival.

This special issue of the Journal offers eight papers continuing this research on union decline and prospects for renewal and growth. They were selected from the papers presented at a conference on 'Union Growth' in May 2001 hosted by the University of Toronto to mark the retirement of Professor Noah Meltz, a past director of the University's Center for Industrial Relations.

2. The Special Issue

The first three papers in this Special Issue are concerned with the nature of the decline. Farber and Western open by showing that a significant portion of the decline in US unions can be accounted for by the drop in union organizing activity, which is manifested in the decrease in union representation elections over the past twenty years. They test for whether a shift to the more conservative Reagan administration, and/or to a National Labor Relations Board less supportive of collective bargaining, can account for this decline and find both of these explanations inadequate. It would seem that the reason for union decline cannot be placed simply, if at all, on a shift in political ideology of the government.

Visser examines union decline in Western Europe and, in line with Farber and Western, concludes that labour market and structural changes in the economy have been of prime importance. Institutional factors such as the centralization of bargaining may moderate these influences but cannot in themselves avert the tendency for new jobs to be associated with non-membership, especially in the small firms and the growing service sector. Visser also shows that attitudes towards unionism in the Netherlands have not changed substantially since the 1960s. Instrumental attitudes are and always have been strong. The social pressures on young workers to join may, however, be declining.

Kuruvilla, Das, Kwon and Kwon focus on Asia and again place emphasis on economic forces, arguing that it is those countries most exposed to free trade that have experienced the most decline. Governments that have adopted neoliberal policies on their own or under pressure from international financial agencies have further reduced the influence and effectiveness of unions.

The next paper, by Chaykowski and Slotsve, examines one of the beneficial consequences of unions, namely lower economic inequality. Using Canadian data, they show that unions are associated with lower inequality, especially in the lower quintiles of the earnings distribution; hence further union decline, itself not that high in Canada, may affect inequality adversely. The working poor, particularly youth, females, part-time workers, minorities and those who have less education and skill, fare much better when unionized.

Another consequence of the declining presence of unions may well be an increasing representation gap as measured by the number of employees who wish to have more representation and influence in decisions in their workplace than is currently available. This may take the form of a latent demand for union representation. Charlwood, in the fifth paper, explores the extent of this and the reasons why some people would join a union were one available in their workplace. He examines this with UK data and confirms that the standard model of union recruitment depends on a combination of dissatisfaction with current working conditions or employer practices and an instrumental view that unions can improve these conditions. However, having left-wing political views is also significant.

Next, Gomez, Gunderson and Meltz focus on the views of young workers towards unions. Analysing Canadian data, they find that young workers in fact have a stronger preference than adults for unions and that this preference results from a stronger desire of youths to have unions deal with workplace issues, rather than from the exposure of youths to these issues. The preferences of young workers are strongly shaped by their family circumstances, i.e. by whether their parents are or were union members and the attitudes of family and friends towards unions, a force which Visser suggests may be in decline. What Gomez *et al.* take to be substitutes for unionization, such as progressive HRM practices and legislative protection, reduce young workers' willingness to join unions.

Finally, two papers examine alternative strategies for reversing union decline. Erickson, Fisk, Milkman, Mitchell and Wrong explore a case study of a successful attempt to organize unskilled service workers which combines conventional union activity with the building of coalitions with other community groups and opinion leaders. This case is the successful unionization of Los Angeles janitors, a particularly disadvantaged and low-skilled occupation. The paper identifies the factors that have allowed the union to survive and grow, particularly the way the union has overcome the limits of American labour law, redefined bargaining power and strike leverage, and captured public opinion.

Diamond and Freeman examine the ways in which the opportunities of 'e-business' are being exploited by trade unions. Five ways in which the internet can be used are identified: it can (1) ease organization and produce virtual minority unions at many non-union firms; (2) enable unions to improve services to members; (3) enhance democracy in unions; (4) play a vital role in industrial disputes; and (5) strengthen the international labour community.

3. Implications for the future of unions

Taken together, these papers provide vital inputs to the debate on the future of unions. In the remainder of this introduction we will draw out their implications for some of the key questions surrounding this future, particularly concentrating on the prospects for revival where unions are in decline.

Demand for representation

There remains a strong demand for union representation or some institutional means of gaining a voice on issues of vital concern to workers today. This is obviously a necessary but not sufficient condition for any form of union revival. Charlwood in particular reports that four out of ten non-union employees would be willing to join a union if the option were

available at the workplace. If all those who wanted to join were able to do so, union membership in Britain would be higher by nearly 3.2 million members. This is consistent with similar studies in North America (Lipset and Meltz 1997; Freeman and Rogers 1999). For at least the last quarter-century in North America, between 30 and 40 per cent of the work-force has expressed an interest in or preference for traditional union representation over non-union status. At the same time, twice as many want other forms of voice at work which do not entail the risks of a strike or employer retaliation and resistance encountered in traditional union organizing drives. Workers also express strong interest in having a job environment that supports life-long learning and allows them the flexibility to integrate or better balance work and family life. There are signs that unions are adjusting their approach to mirror these demands. But whether or not this potential base of support for representation and voice can be turned into membership through organizing is an open question.

Methods of organizing

While there appears to be significant latent demand for unions, the bottom line of these studies is that, if past cause–effect patterns continue, continued reliance on the methods of organizing, focused on organizing groups of workers who are deeply dissatisfied with their jobs or employers and see unions as instrumental to improving their conditions, will not reverse the decline. This is especially true in countries that require a majority of workers in an establishment or bargaining unit to vote for representation in order for unions to gain any members. For example, Farber and Western point out it would take more than a ten-fold increase in organizing activity (and the same ratio of organizing success) for US unions to rebuild union density to their pre-1980 levels

American unions are not alone in this regard. Visser's data from the Netherlands, Charlwood's analysis of the propensity of British workers to join unions, and the Gomez–Gunderson–Meltz data on Canadian workers converge to a similar conclusion. While US unions face further handicaps in using the traditional model of organizing because of strong employer resistance to unions and demonstrated inequities and failures of labour law to protect worker rights to unionize (Commission on the Future of Worker–Management Relations 1994), the fact that the same conclusions about the limits of this model emerge from studies in other countries (Canada, Britain, the Netherlands), countries that differ in both the intensity of employer opposition and labour law, suggests that the problem is much deeper.

The retention challenge

The difficulty that unions have in retaining members once organized is perhaps as important as the initial recruitment challenge. Visser's paper documents the magnitude of the challenge posed by membership turnover.

For every ten members recruited into Dutch unions, eight are lost. This means that to realize a net gain of one new member, unions have to organize or recruit five people. In the USA there are currently twice as many former union members as current ones (Osterman *et al.* 2001: 124). This means that many workers pass through a phase of union membership at some point in their careers but do not retain their membership over their life course. Clearly, strategies that maintain membership through periods of job transition, movements in and out of the labour force or from full-time to part-time status would pay handsome dividends to union growth.

A shift to a model of life-long membership that provides services and benefits to workers as they move through their full life course is one way to rethink the process of organizing and recruiting. The idea would be to recruit members at or even before the start of their careers and to provide services and membership benefits sufficient to sustain their membership over their full life course (Osterman *et al.* 2001: chapter 4). Few unions currently provide this type of continuity, however, and this makes it difficult to test these ideas using traditional field-based research methods. Some examples do exist, for example the Association of Professional Engineers, Scientists, and Managers of Australia or the branches of the Communications Workers of America, which are attempting to organize high-technology workers at companies such as Microsoft and IBM (Osterman *et al.* 2001: 113–14). Many craft and professional unions are also providing options for carrying membership across employers and through spells of unemployment. Some broad international comparisons are possible, too. As Visser points out, the union movements that come the closest to providing incentives for workers to retain their membership when they move between jobs, namely unions in countries such as Denmark and Sweden, which deliver unemployment benefits to people between jobs, are also the labour movements that have done better in limiting union membership decline.

Targeting youth

Targeting particular sections of the working population may pay off. Visser and Gomez *et al.* in particular point to young workers. Visser's analysis of the Dutch case illustrates the stark reality: either unions organize workers within the first five years of their job experience, or they are likely to lose them for the rest of their careers. Gomez *et al.* suggest that young workers would respond to what they call a social-capital-based organizing strategy. Since they find that young workers are particularly influenced by their families, peers and others in their social and educational networks, they suggest that unions should make efforts to reach young workers by being visible participants in these networks. This is an intriguing proposition. More work is needed to understand the range of groups and institutions that form the natural networks of young workers and workers in specific occupations, professions or sectors and how these might influence worker views of or expectations for unions.

Alliances, networks and communications

Several papers suggest that modifications to traditional union methods can bear fruit. Erickson *et al.* demonstrate the importance, at least for the USA, of building alliances between a largely immigrant labour force and membership base and key community and national religious leaders, politicians, customers and the general public. Traditional US union strategies of organizing through elections under existing labour law proved ineffective in a setting where power and control over employment conditions was dispersed across multiple owners, contractors and tenants. One lesson from this case is that an important source of power for unions today is derived from the coalition and network they can draw on in bargaining or potential strike situations. This makes union–management relations a much more public relations, media-intensive process than the private and somewhat opaque process that both researchers and practitioners have regarded it in the past. By building networks and alliances over time and maintaining open lines of communication, these allies can be called on for support in times of crisis or when critical decisions affecting union members' interests are to be made. This is consistent with the forthcoming study by Safford and Locke of network relations that building trade unions have built up in two different US cities. The unions that have built and maintained broad-based network ties with employers, political leaders, civic organizations and other community institutions have been more successful in maintaining their membership base over an extended period of time. These unions have been able to call on their network partners for support when needed. In this way, the network ties have served as a critical source of power.

Kuruvilla *et al.* also show the importance of building coalitions with the growing number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that are attempting to speak for and represent workers in Asia. Some of the most successful NGOs have shown how to use information to expose the exploitation of children and adults working for contractors tied to transnational firms. In doing so they demonstrate the potential of information and transparency as a source of power for workers and their advocates. Whether NGOs can translate episodic exposures and achievements into ongoing labour institutions and organizations complete with a long-term vision, organizational purpose and structure to sustain their efforts would appear to be an important question that remains unanswered.

NGOs are not the only potential coalition partner or new organizational form emerging to represent or serve workers. In the USA organizations are emerging such as Working Today, a labour market intermediary that provides medical insurance coverage and other services to independent contractors working in the media and related industries (Horowitz 1997). In more than forty communities across the country, community coalitions have arisen and worked with unions to support living wage campaigns aimed at establishing wage standards for firms that have contracts with local governments. It would seem that the ability to build and sustain coalitions

with other groups that advocate for issues of deep concern to workers and their families will be an important part of the task facing twenty-first-century labour organizations.

More generally, Diamond and Freeman provide many examples of how unions can use modern technology to build networks and coalitions both among organizations and between unions and their members. By making information more accessible, unions can translate knowledge, information and transparency of practices into a source of power and a means of co-ordination across unions and other organizations and in communications with members. Again, youth becomes important here, since use and facility with the internet as a communications tool is negatively correlated with age. Unions can take advantage of this by engaging young workers through this medium to deliver information and valued services, and to mobilize them for organizing, bargaining or pursuing political actions or campaigns. Diamond and Freeman emphasize that this is a tool that unions can either use to their advantage or neglect and have it used by other organizations that can substitute for unions or compete with them for worker loyalty and affiliation.

Overcoming employer opposition

Employer opposition remains a significant obstacle to union revival. Clearly, employer suppression of or hostility towards unions has always served as a strong deterrent to union organizing and membership stability. This has been and continues to be an especially strong deterrent to union growth in highly decentralized systems such as North America or the UK, where union organizing battles take place one employer or workplace at a time. But another set of management practices may be having an even bigger effect in reducing the demand for unionization than these direct suppression tactics. As Gomez *et al.* point out, where management HRM practices appear to substitute for some of the traditional functions of unions, this may diminish employees' desire or perceived need for unions. This is another reason why an organizing strategy that relies on job or employer dissatisfaction as a prime motivation to join a union may have limited success in recruiting new members.

Can strategies be devised that take the employer out of the preferences of workers and the process by which workers become union members? This is perhaps the biggest challenge facing unions today and the one that, if solved, would produce the largest payoffs to union revival and growth.

4. Tracking alternative scenarios for the future

Firm predictions about the future of unions are not possible. Instead, we will consider four ways of conceiving the future, arguing that the future looks bleak for unions if one accepts that incremental change is the norm; however, if a disjunctive model that allows for the possibility that unions

can themselves change materializes, then the prospects for revival look stronger.

Continued decline: past trends predict the future

Perhaps the clearest prediction that can be drawn from this research is that, if unions do nothing to change their approach to organizing, or make only modest changes at the margin such as investing more resources in current strategies, the trends of the past two decades are likely to continue. Unions, at least as we knew them in the twentieth century, will continue to decline in membership density. Although density is not a perfect predictor of power and influence, it is perhaps the strongest correlate of the ability of unions to perform positive political and economic functions for their members and their societies.

History, however, teaches us that such predictions are seldom borne out completely. Conditions change, pent-up demands for institutions produce innovations either within or outside existing organizations to meet these demands. So, while steady-state predictions hold if the environmental trends of the past continue into the future, the *ceteris paribus* conditions here are the controlling factor.

Fragmented growth: building on existing strengths

A second scenario follows the extrapolation of the current situation and relationships, but differentiates more sharply between union membership size or density and union power and influence. This is the possibility of a labour movement in the future that is numerically strong in a limited number of sectors within individual economies. Such an existence in particular niches is highly compatible with ecological theories of social and economic institutions. The labour movement could maintain its current base and, with continuous adaptation, become stronger and more effective in some sectors or occupations with little growth or even presence in others.

Variation could also persist or increase across countries. For example, one could imagine that unions in Scandinavian countries in particular, and perhaps in Europe more generally, will maintain their membership and perhaps expand from their current base more successfully than unions in other parts of the world. Labour in Europe continues to be more fully integrated into social and political affairs and more accepted as a key institution for a democratic society; in some countries, it also delivers key labour market services to members, thereby creating incentives to maintain membership over one's full life cycle. Where these conditions pertain, unions are likely to remain at least as strong as they are today.

Rejuvenation through crisis: event will create a revival

Historically, unions have grown in spurts during periods when unique combinations of social, political and economic forces have created a positive

climate for union growth. The current period, although unfavourable to unions, is unlikely to last for ever. Eventually a traumatic economic or social crisis, similar to the Great Depression in the USA, the fall of the Berlin Wall in Europe or the defeat of Nazism and Fascism in the Second World War, could produce a resurgence in unions.

This expectation would seem to place too much reliance on some invisible or natural swing of history without considering the factors that affect whether or not unions have grown in past periods of economic or political crisis or change. Consider the three examples mentioned above. Unions in the USA did grow rapidly after the Great Depression; but they did so because they adopted a new form and organizing strategy under a new labour law. Industrial unionism was born out of the failure of craft unions to organize the growing numbers of unskilled and semi-skilled workers in manufacturing. At the end of the Second World War, unions in Japan and Germany re-emerged and grew to positions of significant influence in their societies with the active support of the occupation governments. Both German and Japanese labour movements adapted their structures and processes to fit the economies and societies of that era; enterprise unionism, for example, grew out of a political struggle in Japan and fitted well with the culture and industrial organization of the postwar Japanese economy.

The fall of the Berlin Wall demonstrates that unions do not emerge as a natural response to a liberal economy and democracy. Union membership has not spread to large numbers of workers in the former East Europe economies. Where it has grown the most, as in the former East Germany and, briefly, in Poland, it did so because unions had strong support from the post-communist government and other actors and institutions in civil society. So even those waiting for some crisis need to ask what new strategies and structures for unions will gain this type of support when and if a crisis occurs. Crisis may be a necessary condition for non-incremental union revival, but history suggests that it is not sufficient.

Prospects for revival: metamorphosis to new forms of unions

Finally, there is the scenario that envisions unions going through a metamorphosis during which, by trial and error, a variety of new organizational forms emerge and perhaps come to coexist. The papers that follow may provide insights into what some of these new forms and strategies might involve. At the micro level, unions would meet the pent-up demands for union representation by recruiting members early in their careers and adapting strategies and organizational structures to allow them to retain membership as they move across jobs and through different stages of their life cycle. This will require unions to form network-like structures that connect workers and perhaps their family members to different organizations providing the specialized representation and/or labour market services needed at different points in time and life experience. Unions would need to

work in coalition with NGOs and other institutions that advocate for or represent workers. All these bodies would become closer, if not part of, the labour movement of the twenty-first century.

At more aggregate levels, this type of labour movement would take on the features of a web of related yet differentiated organizations and institutions, some of which would identify themselves as unions and some of which would call themselves something else but would perform important functions for workers and labour markets. Whether these differentiated forms would coalesce to amass political influence on behalf of the work-force similar to or greater than that achieved by twentieth-century unions at their pinnacle will be another interesting and important issue to track. Much remains to be understood regarding whether the isolated innovations that can be observed within unions, NGOs and other groups and organizations attempting to speak for workers will grow in number, find appropriate niches in which they can function successfully, and contribute to a revival of worker representation.

These scenarios, and the propositions that underlie them, need to be considered in as many different national, industry and occupational settings as possible. What materializes in any one country will continue to depend on specific country differences, including current institutional arrangements and traditions, but the country's various locations in the global economy will become increasingly significant. Too much of the industrial relations research on unions continues to focus on a narrow range of countries and industrial settings.

This special issue of the *BJIR* is itself highly confined, but the hope is that it will help to extend research on similar lines. Meanwhile, the Editorial Board of the Journal would welcome responses to these contributions, particularly addressing the generalizability of the papers' findings and the success of current fresh initiatives by trade unions and other organizations representing workers' interests.

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