



Are unions facing a crisis? labor officials are divided

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Union officials are concerned about the future of the labor movement, according to results of a recent survey. They recognize that they face a period marked by economic, technological, social, and political changes which do not augur well for organized labor. While the leaders who responded to the survey do not express panic over this prospect, they definitely see a period of difficulty ahead.

In 1963, a survey was sent to all national and international union presidents and union research and education directors listed in the Bureau of Labor Statistics directory of labor unions.¹ Of the 339 questionnaires sent, 85 responses were obtained, a response rate of 25 percent. In 1983, the same questions were asked of presidents and research directors of unions and employee associations listed in the 1979 Bureau of Labor Statistics directory of labor organizations. Of the 212 questionnaires sent, 79 usable responses were received, a response rate of 37 percent.²

Responding organizations represented unions and employee associations covering the broad spectrum of the labor movement. The size of responding unions ranged from several thousands to hundreds of thousands in membership. Most of the respondents were from traditional strongholds in manufacturing and nonmanufacturing and from the public sector, although unions in other sectors of the economy were represented as well. Employee associations in the respondent group came from States with strong union movements and with public sector bargaining laws. The size and industry distribution of respondents indicate that the sample is representative of labor organizations.

Responses to both the 1983 and 1963 surveys are shown in table 1. Using paired comparison t-tests, statistically significant differences at the .05 level, or lower, of significance were found for several questions, indicating a shifting of opinion among union officials on some important issues. In 1983, 62.7 percent of the union officials surveyed believed members do not know what their union does for them, up from 53.6 percent in 1963. Interestingly, a study by Thomas

Kochan shows that union members expect their union to perform at a higher level than what they perceive their unions to be providing.³ Whether this reflects unrealistic expectations by union members is speculative, but union officials might interpret those results in that fashion.

Union officials perceive a general weakening of labor's power, compared with 20 years ago, saying that labor's social impact and collective bargaining power is weaker today. More of the current respondents strongly believe that economic considerations have limited their ability to improve the well-being of members. The effect of general economic conditions is also registered on the question of the employer's ability to pay. In the current survey, a significantly higher proportion of union officials recognize that this factor should be taken into account in bargaining.

Union officials believe that opportunities for advancement in union hierarchy are better today than they were in the earlier survey. They also believe the AFL-CIO should not coordinate activities such as organizing to any greater extent than it already does. (Only 15 percent agreed or strongly agreed that the "Federation should have more authority over organizing," a big change from 1963 when 25 percent agreed.)⁴ They say labor is better prepared today to meet the problems posed by automation and economic change.

In both surveys, a large majority of respondents agreed that the labor movement has suffered from a lack of vitality in recent years. However, union officials do not see this as emanating from union leadership. In 1983, a larger proportion believed that such values as dedication and idealism are widely held, but still a sizable minority (37 percent in 1983 and 44 percent in 1963) believed such values are not widely held among union officials.

The responses indicate that union officials see the barriers to union growth as coming from outside the labor movement. A smaller proportion in 1983 believed that priority should be given to organizing white-collar workers over blue-collar workers.⁵ Little change occurred in the beliefs of union officials on the need to establish links between organized labor and nonlabor reform groups. The entreaties of commentators from outside the labor movement who have called for re-establishing and forging new connections with nonlabor reform groups apparently have not shifted the views of union officials.⁶ Nor was there any change in attitudes about borrowing ideas from foreign labor movements. Only 25 percent of the current respondents disagreed that unions were doing all they could to bring blacks into the movement,

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Table 1. Union officials' attitudes about the labor movement

Question	Survey date	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Mean ¹
Members do not understand what union does	1983	29.4	33.3	10.3	23.1	3.8	22.38
	1963	10.7	42.9	9.5	26.2	10.7	22.83
Need for formal opposition within unions	1983	5.1	22.8	32.9	20.3	19.0	3.25
	1963	8.3	21.4	16.7	39.3	14.3	3.30
Lack of vitality in labor movement	1983	29.1	44.3	8.9	12.7	5.1	2.20
	1963	27.4	36.9	6.0	23.8	6.0	2.40
Need for government involvement in internal union affairs	1983	7.6	32.9	10.1	27.8	21.6	3.23
	1963	10.7	37.6	3.6	24.7	23.5	3.13
Leader-held values of self-sacrifice, idealism, and dedication	1983	10.1	38.0	15.2	24.1	12.7	2.91
	1963	9.5	33.3	13.1	33.3	10.7	2.98
Less upward mobility in union hierarchy today	1983	3.8	19.2	16.7	47.4	12.8	23.45
	1963	9.4	30.6	10.6	36.5	13.0	23.16
More stress on organizing white-collar workers	1983	10.1	25.3	43.0	12.7	8.9	2.85
	1963	25.9	27.1	13.0	31.8	2.4	2.58
Future of labor movement is secure	1983	6.3	20.3	17.7	36.7	19.0	3.42
	1963	2.4	18.3	12.2	48.8	18.3	3.63
Internal problems are weakening the ability of labor union growth	1983	7.6	20.3	12.7	34.2	25.3	3.49
	1963	9.8	17.1	8.5	42.7	22.0	3.50
Most important force behind social legislation	1983	26.9	42.3	16.7	9.0	5.1	22.23
	1963	38.6	45.8	6.0	9.6	0.0	21.87
Federation should have more authority over organizing	1983	2.6	12.7	25.3	38.0	21.5	23.63
	1963	8.6	25.9	13.6	34.6	17.3	23.26
Labor's collective bargaining power is weaker today	1983	11.4	59.5	12.7	12.7	3.8	22.38
	1963	12.2	39.0	11.0	32.9	4.9	22.79
Too much political involvement, put more stress on collective bargaining	1983	8.9	7.6	10.1	34.2	39.2	3.87
	1963	6.0	7.2	3.6	37.3	45.8	4.10
Structure not adequate to meet challenge of robotics, automation	1983	15.2	26.6	12.7	36.7	8.9	22.97
	1963	16.9	37.3	19.3	24.1	2.4	22.58
Disregard economic situation of company in bargaining	1983	2.6	10.3	19.2	50.0	18.0	23.71
	1963	3.7	25.6	13.4	47.6	9.8	23.34
Not enough influence on foreign policy	1983	8.9	39.2	30.4	17.7	3.8	2.68
	1963	10.8	51.8	8.4	20.5	8.4	2.64
Should borrow more from European labor unions	1983	7.6	17.7	38.0	26.6	10.1	3.14
	1963	4.8	19.3	22.9	38.6	14.5	3.39
Closer ties with nonunion reform groups	1983	5.1	40.1	27.8	17.7	8.9	2.85
	1963	6.1	42.7	20.7	23.2	7.3	2.83
Unions doing all they can to bring blacks into the ranks	1983	13.9	32.9	27.8	17.7	7.6	2.72
	1963	12.9	34.1	11.8	28.2	13.0	2.94
Economic conditions weakening ability to get better wages and benefits	1983	32.9	60.8	0.0	5.1	1.3	21.81
	1963	10.7	54.8	10.7	19.0	4.8	22.52

¹Attitudes were scaled from 1 to 5, with "strongly agree" equaling 1 and "strongly disagree," 5. The mean is the average value for responses to the question.

²Mean significantly different at .05 level or below.

compared with 40 percent in 1963.

About one-fourth of the current officials were confident about the security and status of the labor movement, compared with slightly more than one-fifth in 1963. Nonetheless, a majority of both current and past respondents disagreed that the "future of labor movement is secure," indicating, perhaps, that organized labor does not feel accepted in this country. However, with the difficulties caused by a weak economy and an increase in employer opposition to unions, the extent of agreement with the statement when compared with conditions at the time of the 1963 survey could indicate a more self-confident labor movement.

Specific problems

Respondents were asked to comment on several questions on labor's problems and their causes. The responses are presented in table 2.

In 1983, 51 percent of the respondents believed there was a crisis in the American labor movement. The most frequently identified problems causing the crisis were union policies and structure, "antilabor" government policies,

and labor's public image. Only a few mentioned the economy and union leadership. Automation and unemployment were not even mentioned, unlike in 1963 when half of the respondents said these were the main problems. One respondent commented, "We live in an anti-union environment . . . a period of extreme uncertainty politically and economically" which has hurt the labor movement. A union president said unions were often perceived as "standing in the way of progress," and employers have used this to weaken unions. Another remarked that business "refuses to accept labor as a partner," unlike the situation in other Western industrialized countries, echoing a comment made in the 1963 survey.

Membership, bureaucracy, and leadership apathy have made it difficult for labor to respond positively to an economic situation that has eroded union strength in basic industries. While several respondents called for expansion of membership in the growing service sector and among white-collar workers, their comments evinced little in the way of optimism. A union official remarked that union membership has declined because "it [labor] did too good a job of raising

the standard of living of its members [who] are now complacent. In raising the standard of living for its members, other segments of society have been pulled along [and] these segments see no reason now to unionize.”

The internal causes of organized labor’s problems were identified as leadership and union policies and ideology. Respondents cited arrogance, inability to prepare successors, dogmatism, adherence to outdated ideas, and shortsightedness as leadership problems. The overall tone of this line of criticism is illustrated by this comment: “[the labor] movement has lost its role as a cause for many [leaders] and is simply a job. Many are more interested in holding union office for money and power and not to effect significant change. Union leadership worries about their reelection more than anything.”

Several respondents criticized union policy, or the “lack of philosophy,” as an internal cause of labor’s problems. One noted that organized labor “has not been able to persuade the majority of workers of the worth of unions.” The unions emphasize “the more, more, more philosophy instead of planning for the future.” Too often, the unions come across to the public with an attitude of “to hell with the consumer. We want what we want or we’ll cripple the economy.” Another believed that corruption still tainted the labor movement and that “unions need to purge corruption with the same effort they fight arbitrary management.” Yet, as one official wrote, even when labor has made “substantial inroads into solving the problem of . . . corruption,” the public perception remains negative.

In the 1963 survey, respondents listed three main external causes of labor’s problems: antiunion propaganda, unsympathetic government policies, and technological change and unemployment. Respondents in the current survey view the external causes as emanating from similar sources with some differences, though, in emphasis. Those who see government policy as an external cause mention the inability of the National Labor Relations Board to get compliance for some of its orders, the “hostile” administration of the National Labor Relations Act, the Railway Labor Act, and the

Landrum-Griffin Act, and the proliferation of State and local laws that hamper labor’s effort to organize and represent workers.

Current respondents see economic conditions and managerial attitudes often acting jointly to trouble the labor movement. Several commented that “there is . . . in the establishment . . . a concentrated effort to downgrade unions” by taking every opportunity to create a “public image of . . . unions as corrupt manipulators who steal . . . dues and cause all of a company’s problems” They believe that employers have taken advantage of the weakened economy, especially in basic industries, to close unionized plants and move elsewhere. The activities of antiunion groups spreading propaganda against unions and the use of union busters by management have made organizing and maintaining existing bargaining units more difficult.

The economy, one union official said, has served as a battering ram that companies have used to break collective bargaining relationships. That along with the transition to a service economy has “eliminated thousands of traditional union jobs.” The exasperations of many respondents were summarized by one official: “The unions are blamed for productivity problems—why doesn’t anyone . . . chide the corporations for failing to modernize instead of paying stock dividends.”

All the respondents who answered the question on external causes saw such causes as serious threats to the labor movement. One referred to the conjoining of these forces as a “debacle” for the labor movement. The broader implication of the weakening of organized labor is summed up in this comment: “[Unionism] has been the underpinning of middle-class achievements. We seem to currently be moving to a bipolar structure which will weaken further the middle class as changes occur in the economy. The effect of this . . . is yet to be seen . . . but is frightening.” □

—FOOTNOTES—

¹ Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Directory of National and International Labor Unions in the United States, 1961*, Bulletin 1320 (Washington, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1962). For an account of the 1963 survey, see Solomon Barkin and Albert A. Blum, “Is There a Crisis in the American Trade Union Movement?—The Trade Unionists’ Views,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, November 1963, pp. 16–24.

² Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Directory of National Unions and Employee Associations, 1979*, Bulletin 2079 (Washington, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1980). The post office was unable to deliver questionnaires to 30 labor organizations. This reduced the sample to 106 unions and associations.

³ See Thomas Kochan, “How American workers view labor unions,” *Monthly Labor Review*, April 1979, pp. 28–30.

⁴ See Derek Bok and John Dunlop, *Labor and the American Community* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1970), pp. 194–96 for an analysis of the problems of federation-sponsored organizing which supports this conclusion.

⁵ The means for the statement, “more stress on organizing white-collar workers,” were almost significant at the .10 level; the calculated t value for the means was .13.

⁶ Bok and Dunlop, *Labor*, pp. 31–34; and H. W. Benson, “Labor Leaders, Intellectuals, and Freedom in the Unions,” *Dissent*, vol. 20, Spring 1973, pp. 206–19.

Table 2. Respondents listing specific problems in labor movement, 1983

Item	Percent
Is there a crisis in the labor movement?	
Agreeing	51
What are the problems causing the crisis?	
Government policies and legislation	39
Labor’s public image	21
Union structure and administrative policies	47
Union leadership	11
Economy	18
What are the internal causes of organized labor problems?	
Leadership problems	45
Structural problems	15
Policies and ideology	39
What are the external causes of organized labor problems?	
Economic conditions/changes	39
Government policy	25
Management hostility	36