

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF LABOR UNIONS IN THE UNITED STATES AND MEXICO

ABSTRACT

Industrial labor unions were birthed because of the abuse of men, women, and children in the workplace. Labor unions have played an integral part in society because of their ability to serve as the collective voice of their members. Modern day society has been molded by some of the actions taken by early-day labor unions. The main intent of this paper is to investigate the effects of labor unions in the United States and Mexico. By examining the relationships between employers and labor unions in both nations, some of the positive and negative effects of labor unions will be identified.

INTRODUCTION

From the beginning of time, unions have always existed in one form or another. History shows that every major revolution has begun with people fighting for a common cause or a belief. Every sports team, every religious group, and every ethnic group are indeed all unions. Webster's dictionary defines a union as "a confederation of independent individuals for some common purpose" (2008). Today, we see that, in every country, a familiar and very influential factor in the business sector is labor unions. From the biggest developed countries, to the smallest developing countries, their presence are known and felt. A labor union is defined as "a group of workers who have banded together to achieve common goals in the key areas of wages, hours, and working conditions" (Boone and Kurtz, 1999). In this paper, we will do an extensive comparative study of the labor unions in the United States and Mexico. We will study their history, as well as both the positive and negative effects labor unions have had on their business economies and industrial sectors as a whole.

HISTORY OF AMERICAN LABOR UNIONS

The earliest form of labor unions began as early as the 1600's in the form of craft unions. The Boston shoemakers banded together and began Guilds in 1648 (Boone and Kurtz, 1999). Their main purpose was to keep up craft standards and to prevent employers from hiring untrained workers and importing foreign labor but as the industrial revolution emerged, the dynamics of unions began to change. The Industrial Revolution brought about specialization of employees in the workplace and a dramatic increase in production (Boone and Kurtz, 1999). This era brought about a mass conversion of skilled tradesman into working class factory workers. With the production boom, workers found themselves working long, arduous hours. Men, women and children were forced to work in unsafe and unbearable working conditions for very little money. In response to their current situation, they found that strength came in numbers so they quickly banded together to demand better wages and working conditions. This brought about the birth of Industrial unions in 1827 where workers in the same industry regardless of their specific job began to join together (Boone and Kurtz, 1999). From 1866 to 1936, five major labor union

organizations emerged. They are The National Labor Union, The Noble Order of the Knights of Labor, American Federation of Labor, Industrial Workers of the World and the Congress for Industrial Organization. These five labor unions are indeed the cornerstones of unions as we know them today.

The National Labor Union (NLU)

The National Labor union began in a conference in Baltimore in 1866 and dissolved in 1872 under the presidency of William H. Sylvis. According to Philip Foner (1947),

The National Labor Union main goal was to bring together all of the national labor organizations in existence, as well as the "eight-hour leagues" established to press for the eight-hour day, to create a national federation that could press for labor reforms and help found national unions in those areas where none existed. (p. 34)

The NLU got support from skilled workers but also gathered support from unskilled workers. They favored arbitration over strikes and used that as their method of bargaining. The union kept attracting members until they grew to about 700,000 members. In 1868, Congress passed the statute for which the union had campaigned so hard, providing the eight-hour day for government workers. However, the employers' countered by reducing wages as they were forced to reduce hours which rendered the law ineffective. When the president of the NLU died, the union divided over political issues and differences and their numbers quickly collapsed (Foner, 1947).

The Noble Order of the Knights of Labor

The Knights of labor began in 1868 as the NLU began to collapse. It was started by six tailors with Uriah Stevens as the leader. It was created as secret organization so as to prevent its members from employer reprisal but all of that quickly changed when Terrance Powderly took over in 1879. By 1886, members of the union grew to over 700,000 members. The Knights sought to unite all the "producers" (Ohio History Central, 2005). Producers were anyone one who constructed a physical product during their work day. Lawyers, bankers, academics, people who didn't engage in physical labor were regarded as "non- producers" (Ohio History Central, 2005). The Knights were the first union to allow blacks and women into their unions.

According to Ohio History Central, "The producers sought an eight-hour workday, an end to child labor, better wages, and improved working conditions in general" (2005). Powderly believed in peaceful negotiations and boycotts and was generally opposed to strikes. He believed that they would only lead to bloodshed and increase tension while other Knights Leaders believed in the strike action. A violent riot broke out in 1886 at the Haymarket square in Chicago during a strike where a dynamite explosion killed several police officers. The Knights were condemned for the violence by the press, Powderly resigned and the Knights of Labor Union began to decline as an effective organization. A group of members left to form the AFL (Ohio History Central, 2005).

American Federation of Labor Union (AFL)

The American Federation of Labor was formed in 1886. Under the leadership of Samuel Gompers, it became the largest union in the United States. Initially, the AFL only allowed skilled workers into the union, unskilled workers, women and blacks could not join the union (Ohio History Central, 2005). Gompers believed in strikes but leaned towards more peaceful negotiations. His main goal was to obtain fair and reasonable contracts from the employers hence, the AFL stayed away from political issues so as not to offend any business owners (Ohio History Central, 2005). Offended business owners would have made it harder to receive better wages and working conditions.

By 1904, membership increased to over 1.7 million. This increase came due to the government support of the unions. They granted many concessions to workers and the unions in an attempt to discourage strikes which could not be afforded because the country was engaged in world war (Ohio History Central, 2005). So by 1920, membership soared to 4 million. With the great success the AFL was experiencing coupled with Gompers death in 1924, certain leaders started to fight for a more inclusive union (Ohio History Central, 2005). They believed that the AFL should allow unskilled workers into the union and not be relegated simply to skilled workers within a certain craft. This issue created great tension between the union until 1935 when John Lewis, an AFL member formed the Committee for Industrial Organization. It was originally under the AFL but was finally expelled in 1937. The division within union greatly affected their numbers (Ohio History Central, 2005).

Industrial Workers of the World (IWW)

In 1905, the Industrial Workers of the World was founded by 200 delegates representing smaller union factions who came together opposing conservative unionism and capitalism. The IWW mission statement was and still is the following:

The working class and the employing class have nothing in common. There can be no peace so long as hunger and want are found among millions of working people and the few, who make up the employing class, have all the good things in life. Between these two classes a struggle must go on until the workers of the world organize as a class, take possession of the means of production, abolish the wage system, and live in harmony with the earth....Instead of the conservative motto, 'A fair day's wage for a fair day's work,' we must inscribe on our banner the revolutionary watchword, 'Abolition of the wage system.' (Radical Economics and the Labor Movement, 2005)

The IWW took a more aggressive approach to fighting for union rights. They organized the first significant effective sit down strike in 1906 at General Electric Factory. All the workers showed up that day to the factory, sat down and refused to work. The success of the strike was so effective that from 1911 to 1917 membership grew to over 100,000 members. The Lawrence textile strike of 1912 and the Paterson strike of 1913 gave IWW momentum. "The success of the IWW created much opposition. Its rhetoric of class war, the overthrow of capitalism, and sabotage frightened employers, the social elites, and the state" (Radical Economics and the Labor Movement, 2005).

However, there were many violent attacks on the IWW members from local vigilante groups and many local laws were established to try to limit the organization's public demonstrations. When

the federal government joined in attacks against the IWW because of their opposition to the World War, and also because they simply wanted to destroy the union, the combined pressure from the state and local authorities finally took its toll on IWW. From 1917 upwards, membership declined and in 1950, it lost its National Labor Board representation rights (Radical Economics and the Labor Movement, 2005).

Congress for Industrial Organization (CIO)

When John Lewis started the CIO in 1935, and split from the AFL, thousands of workers flocked to the union. There had very successful strike actions which drew the attention of the public. One major victory was the sit-down strike that took place in Akron, Ohio in 1936 (Ohio History Central, 2005). The CIO wanted to negotiate better working conditions and better pay for the workers in the Goodyear, Firestone and Goodrich plants. With the workers sitting down in the factories, replacement workers couldn't come in to work and police couldn't be used for fear that plant property would be damaged. Eventually, the plants had no choice but to agree to the union terms. Lewis resigned the presidency and Phillip Murray became president in 1952. By the early 1950's the percentages of unionized began to decline and in 1955 the CIO merged with the AFL. For the remainder of the twentieth century, the AFL-CIO remained the largest union in the United States (Ohio History Central, 2005).

HISTORY OF MEXICAN LABOR UNIONS

The rise of unions started in the early 1900's. After the Mexican revolution in 1910, there was social upheaval that spread all through the nation setting the stage and breeding grounds for unions to emerge. Activist union began to form to protest working conditions and wages. In 1916, Regional Confederation of Mexican Workers (CROM) was formed following a congress of delegates called by the Mexican President Venustiano Carranza (La Botz, 1988). "The role of the official unions was to maintain labor peace, keep wages low, and thus make Mexico profitable for Mexican capitalists and attractive to foreign investors" (La Botz, 1988). The CROM was controlled by a group of union leaders who supported the post- revolutionary government and so those in power used the union party as a political vehicle. The CROM also supported President Carranza's successors Álvaro Obregón and Plutarco Elías Calles.

Under Obregón, the labor movement was co-opted as its leaders were appointed to posts within the government. By the end of Obregón's term, CROM had abandoned its goal of destroying capital in favor of establishing a balance between capital and labor that would benefit workers. (Delarbe, 1976)

Since their interests were vested into the government, the labor leaders began defending the government's rights that was established under Article 123 in 1917, to settle labor disputes (La Botz, 1988). Those who were opposed to the government co-option broke off to start the Confederación General de Trabajadores (CGT), in 1921. When Emilio Portes Gil came into power, he started removing CROM from government positions so their dominance and influence began to dwindle. In 1932, Vicente Lombardo Toledano, one of the leaders in the CROM, organized a faction called "Purified CROM" (La Botz , 1988). The Purified CROM became the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM) in 1936. The CTM today is the largest labor union in

Mexico today and for the longest was an essential support for the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which ruled Mexico under various names for more than seventy years.

Unions, just like any other organizations were created based on a good philosophy. The idea of a body of workers coming together to fight for their rights and better working conditions seems dignified. Today however, there are different opinions of unions and the effects they have on the society. In studying America and Mexico, we have discovered both positive and negative effects that the unions have had on their business economies. We will first address the positive similarities found in both countries and then discuss the different negative effects that are independent to both countries.

POSITIVE EFFECTS OF LABOR UNIONS

After extensive research into both countries, highlighted in the sections below are the similar positive influences that unions have in their business world.

Unions' Influence on Economic Efficiency and Productivity

Unions have a positive effect on productivity which improves the economy and society. According to Michael Beer and Bert Spector (1985), this occurs because unions reduce quit rates, they compel management to alter methods of productions and adopt more efficient policies, and finally they improve the communication channel between managements and workers (p. 111). When unions are present in an organization, the workers opinions and desires are primary factors in creating the working culture and environment. With this in effect, the likelihood of workers quitting drastically reduces which in turn reduces the amount of money spent on hiring and training new workers hence, leading to an increase in efficiency (p. 112). Unions also raise productivity by forcing management into tightening job production customs and responsibility while maintaining profits. Beer and Spector state that “a unionized workforce management is able to extract more output from a given input than is management that is not confronted by unions” (p. 113).

Table 1 below shows the estimates of union impacts on productivity in the Unites States.

TABLE 1

Estimates of the Impact of Unionism on Productivity in the US

Settings	Estimated Increase or Decrease in Output per Worker Due to Unionism in %
For Manufacturing Industries	20 to 25
Wooden Household Furniture	15
Cement	6 to 8
Underground bituminous coal, 1965	25 to 30

Source: Beer, Michael, and Bert A. Spector. Readings in Human Resource Management. New York: Free P, pg 196, year 1985.

The common myth in almost every society, especially in Mexico about the inefficiency of labor unions due to limitation and regulations are not completely true. Unions are, in theory, solver agents which work as a link between managers and workers to determine what is best for both groups. According to Beer and Spector, they provide an alternative mechanism through the implementation of more efficient policies to bring a positive change (p. 115).

According to U.S. department of Labor (2009), unionization in the United States has declined in the last decades representing only about 12% of workers today but strong unions still exist in the US and Mexico (p. 1). According to Eisenbrey, the dramatic drop of unions in the US did not alter the 1.7 % labor productivity growth while in Mexico's unions productivity growth was relatively low with less than 1% in 2004 and 2005 (2009, p. 1).

Unions' Influence on Distribution of Income and Wages

In the book Reading and Human Resources Management, some unions create wage policies to promote economic equality. One policy is the long-standing policy of standards or uniforms rates (1985, p. 120). The other, is a policy wage to eradicate discrimination among minority. Mishel and Walters stated that union members have received higher wages above non-union members (2003). In 1990s wages of unionized workers increased by roughly 20% resulting on a total raise compensation of about 28%. Usually, unionized workers' earnings exceed those of the nonunion workers by about 15%. This phenomenon is known as the "union wage premium" (p. 1).

H. Gregg Lewis found the union wage premium to be between 10% to 20% in his two well-known assessments, the first in the early 1960s (Lewis 1963) and the second more than 20 years later (Lewis 1986). Freeman and Medoff (1984) in their classic analysis, *What Do Unions Do?*, arrived at a similar conclusion. (Mishel and Walters, 2003)

Through time, the United States labor unions have usually been more successful than any of their foreign counterparts in relation to winning wage increases for their members. Of course, this is a positive and attractive incentive for members (p. 1). Mexico's unions however have been less

focused on wage increases and are more concerned with worker's council and plant-level decision making (p. 1). Below is a table of union wage premium:

TABLE 2

Estimate of the Union Wage Premium

Estimates of the union wage premium

Data source (date)	Union premium*	Source
Household Surveys		
<i>Current Population Surveys (CPS)</i>		
All wages and salary (1997)	17.8%	Hirsch and Macpherson (2003, Table 2a)
Private (1997)	18.4%	Hirsch and Shumacher (2002, Table 4)
Private adjusted for imputations (1997)	23.2%	Hirsch and Shumacher (2002, Table 4)
<i>Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP)</i>		
All (1992, 1993, 1996)	24.5%	Gundersen (2003, Appendix B)
Employer Surveys		
<i>National Compensation Survey (NCS)</i>		
All except agriculture and federal (1997)	17.4%	Pieroe (1999a, Table 5)
<i>Employment Cost Index (ECI)</i>		
All except agriculture and federal (1994)		Pieroe (1999b, Table 3)
Hourly wages	20.3%	
Hourly compensation	27.5%	

* Union premium is the percent by which union workers earn more than comparable nonunion workers. These estimates are obtained from analyses which employ "controls" for worker and employer characteristics, industry, and occupation.

Source: Mishel, Lawrence & Walters, Matthew. (2003, August). How Unions Help All Workers, from Economic Policy Institute, Research and Ideas for Shared Prosperity

Positive Influence of Unions among Minority Groups

Unions' aim to protect every worker's rights without discriminating based on sex, age, religion, or sexual orientation. For every employee, especially minorities, unions are an opportunity to have their voices heard through collective bargaining (Cadena, 2007). The fact that there is an entity or organization that will ensure the protection of minority' rights has a great positive impact and should be promoted. Unions do not only promote a peaceful environment in the workplace, but they also improve the society. From the workers' standpoint, joining a union ensures a maximization of their bargaining power (Cadena, 2007).

According to Cadena, civil rights do not protect workers that lose their job based on their sexual orientation. Therefore, those who fall under this category should realize that it is extremely important to join a union (Cadena, 2007). The US in comparison to Mexico, is more open minded and accepting of minority groups. Even though in the US, some employees find it

necessary to hide their sexual orientation at the workplace, in Mexico most unions will not accept them due to this characteristic. Cadena states that in the US, a union provides the freedom from this secrecy and at the same time enables them to conduct their employment without any fear of job loss or discrimination helping again the improvement of the society (2007).

Even though Mexico is more reluctant to employees with different sexual orientations, the country is not against it. Some less powerful unions are formed to protect their members. According to the World Factbook, the TCM is the largest and stronger labor union in Mexico. This labor union supports minorities and even had an affiliate union, the CTM women's affiliate which is the Workers' Federation of Women's Organizations (Federación Obrera de Organizaciones Femeninas) (CIA World Factbook, 1996).

Unions Promote Research and Technology Development

Unions are subject to internal improvements in order to accomplish their goal. Workers' displacement caused by automation forced unions to embrace technology and to use it (Labor unions and similar labor organizations, 2009). From the workforce standpoint, the fast advances in technology promote in some extent unequal benefits for workers. Machinery replaced manual work shifting jobs to a new dimension. Unions, in order to make their members more efficient, should be ready to meet those requirements (Answer.com, 2009). Today most unions in Mexico and the US offer technology training with the exceptions of the Airline Pilots Association and the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers in the US. According to Answer.Com there are two ways that unions have looked at technology; the proactive and the reactive way (2009).

In the United States, the reactive position had been used mostly during contract negotiations. As an example, the motor industry union began efforts of the reactive point of view in 1983. By 1990 they had three main training centers, one at Ford, Chrysler, and General Motors. On the Other hand, unions with a proactive standpoint have embraced technology to achieve the goals of their members. The United Steel-workers of America is a great example of this position. They developed the Institute for Career Development, which provides their members up to \$2,500 for tuition assistance. Their purpose is to seek additional technological training for their members. In addition, the AFL-CIO provides low-cost computers with Internet access to all of its members. Finally, in Mexico the CTM works through their affiliates unions such us the National Union of Peasant Workers to ensure that each member have the necessary technological preparation for the industry regardless of employment status. Both positions seek efficiency and efficacy of unions first, which then later shifts those characteristics to the society (Answer.Com, 2009).

NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF LABOR UNIONS

Addressed below are the negative influences that are independent to the US and Mexico. We will begin with the US and then Mexico.

Negative Effects of Unions in the United States

In a wage negotiation with United Airlines top brass, Rick Dubinsky – former head of the AirLine Pilots Association at United – said, “We don’t want to kill the golden goose. We just want to choke it by the neck until it gives us every last egg” (Lowenstein, 2002). Such a statement raises the question, what happens when the goose runs out of eggs?

Labor unions have been known to be over-demanding, unreasonable and at times, blind to the long-term effects of their actions. A case in point would be the airline industry. In 2002, United Airlines had to declare bankruptcy due to its exorbitant cost of operations – United lost \$3.2 billion in 2002 alone – it had to bear because of unreasonable labor demands (Chavez, 2004). Also in that year, US Airways filed bankruptcy and American Airlines almost followed suit until there were last-minute concessions from its union leaders (Chavez, 2004).

Killing the Golden Goose

To exhibit some of the destructive tendencies of unions, it would be beneficial to use United Airlines as a case study. In 2000, United announced a possible merger with US Airways during wage renegotiations with its pilots’ union. After the announcement, the union decided to take action against United since such a merger was deemed unacceptable by the pilots because it would mean the loss of seniority of some of the United pilots and possible wage cuts (Lowenstein, 2002). Never mind the fact that the merger could have improved the company’s stock price which is predominantly owned by the employees of United – with the pilots owning the biggest bloc with 25% (Lowenstein, 2002). The pilots decided to take action against the company in order to show their discontent over the merger deal. Lowenstein reports that the pilots refused to fly overtime, some of them flew low to burn more fuel and notably, one pilot walked off a full 747 due to a case of nerves (2002). In the end, the merger fell through and management agreed to a pay raise of 22-28% with incremental raises of 4.5% each year till 2004. With demands such as these, it is not surprising that United filed for bankruptcy in 2002 after the crash of the stock market which was caused by the tech bubble bust and further amplified by the 9/11 attacks (Lowenstein, 2002).

Union vs. Right-to-work Labor

In an ideal situation, the negative effects of unions should be felt by its own members alone but this does not hold true since the local economies of unionized states seems to tell another story of how unions affect ordinary people in the local economy. To further expand on this point, studies have shown that people who live in unionized states tend to pay higher taxes, earn less (in adjusted dollars) and experience a higher cost of living than those who live in free-choice or right-to-work states (Chavez, 2004). In 2008, the National Institute for Labor Relations Research conducted a study to analyze the differences between certain economic factors in unionized states and right-to-work states (2008).

Chavez illustrates through the results that “someone making \$30,000 in right-to-work Phoenix would need to make \$41,083 to have the same purchasing power in forced-unionism Los Angeles” (2004). Furthermore, it can be said that, “in states without Right-to-Work laws, high

taxes and the high cost of living erode the purchasing power of income so much that families in states with Right-to-Work laws are, on average, better off” (Bennett, 1994).

Negative Effects of Unions in Mexico

In nearby Mexico, the case for labor unions is somewhat similar but as is the case with differing cultures and government, there are a few discrepancies. These discrepancies are further elucidated in this section.

Government-Controlled Puppets

In the nation of Mexico, the labor unions are state controlled but they also play a predominant role in the hiring practices of unionized firms and sectors (De La Cruz, 2002). This sort of arrangement would seem like a conflict of interests from a neutral standpoint but the former ruling party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) – which ruled the country for over 60 years before being ousted from power in 2000 – set up this model thereby entrenching it into the very fiber of Mexican government (De La Cruz, 2002). Such a system is not designed to deter favoritism or prevent such a power from being used for ignoble purposes. On the contrary, it promotes manipulation whereby the government can exert control over state affiliated unions. History illustrates by providing examples where government has used unions for its own purposes. For example, during the regime of Carlos Salinas de Gortari, the government was able to promote some of its market reforms because Salinas was very adept at “controlling labor opposition” thereby winning their support (Murillo, 2001). As is the case with politics, not all unions were ensnared by Salinas’s tactics but holding such a stance did not bode well for such unions since the government would allocate the limited resources available only to “compliant confederations” (Murillo, 2001).

Inherent in such a system is the ability for the government to control business practices, since the government has tremendous control over the labor unions which in turn “exercise a great deal of influence on business affairs and their workers (De La Cruz, 2002).

Corruption—The Epilogue of Empowerment

During the PRI’s rein of power, the party would assign “20% of [its] elected officials to be labor union leaders” (De La Cruz, 2002). The labor union leaders or “union bosses” during the PRI’s rein were commonly referred to as “charros” mainly because of their “[s]elf-serving and corrupt” natures (Boudreaux, 2002; Needler 1995). With such a system in place, the PRI was able to control the country’s political system (Sherman, 2006). Being in such high-ranking positions, such leaders were able to elicit monetary favors from employers but such practices were not exclusively reserved for employers only, union leaders were also known for abusing union funds and extorting money from union members in return for higher placement in unionized firms (Needler 1995). Inevitably, some of these corrupt leaders would use their ill-gotten wealth to live extravagant lifestyles which included throwing lavish parties, buying expensive jewelry, living in luxurious homes and gambling in Las Vegas (Boudreaux, 2002).

CONCLUSION

After researching labor unions in both countries, learning of their history, and understanding their structure, it is fair to say that unions can be a positive influence and at the same time be equally a very negative influence. We see that unions, as an entity, were formed to protect the interest of workers; however, the country in which they are established influences the amount of freedom they have to actually support their causes. In the United States, unions bring about better wages for unionized workers, but at what expense? The workers enjoy the fruit of better wages, but what happens when the company goes bankrupt because of these external pressures? The labor unions in Mexico strive to provide better jobs for workers; but, when they become political vehicles and government-controlled entities, who truly benefits from their existence? We can, therefore, conclude that the effects of labor unions in the U.S. and Mexico are influenced by external factors which compel what they influence and how they function.

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