What Explains Unorganized Workers’ Growing Demand for Unions?

Ian Robinson
University of Michigan

In Reorganizing the Rust Belt, Steve Lopez begins to fill an important gap in the literature on the crisis of business unionism and the efforts to build a new social movement unionism in the United States. Penetrating critiques of the weaknesses of business unions are not new. Sidney Lens’s The Crisis of American Labor, written in 1959, is an early classic of this genre. Like Lopez’s book, Lens’s Crisis was written by someone who could combine effectively the practical wisdom gained from participation within unions with a sharp theoretical analysis. Lens focused on showing what was wrong with business unionism at a time when the U.S. labor movement was relatively powerful. Today, the weaknesses of business unionism are all too apparent. Lopez’s biggest contribution, therefore, lies in his close examination of two “follow-up” questions: can unions characterized by a legacy of business union norms and practices transform themselves into social movement unions, and if so, how? This book is far from the last word on these issues, but it is a great beginning.

Lopez uses the experience of a single Service Employees International Union local in Pittsburgh, between 1995 and 1998, to explore these questions. The book is divided into three parts, with each analyzing a different challenge facing U.S. unions: first, the challenge of organizing workers into unions and winning certification campaigns; second, the challenge of mobilizing union members to support organizing efforts, solidarity actions, political campaigns, and so on; and third, the challenge of devising a strategy for winning a first contract in a political and legal context where employers are often willing and able to permanently replace striking workers. In each of these areas, Lopez explores how business unionism makes effective responses to these challenges more difficult. He then looks at how means were developed to address or circumvent these internal obstacles. I found Lopez’s analysis of Local A’s internal power dynamics in this process one of the most illuminating parts of the book.

One of the great strengths of this book is its case study methodology: one can only get a firm grasp on union institutional structures, cultures, and politics—factors that vary widely among unions and are critical to how union actors see and respond to their world—through detailed empirical investigation of particular unions as they evolve over time. Yet the case study method is also the source of the book’s main limitations in my view. Three kinds of limitations typically arise in analyses that focus on a small number of cases. First, it is difficult to know how generalizable the
relationships observed in a particular case may be. Second, case studies, by virtue of their narrow focus, tend to blur into the background important aspects of the wider context that shape what is going on in the cases under the microscope. Finally, because they pay less attention to contextual factors, case studies are prone to miss important changes in these variables.

For the most part, Lopez avoids these problems, making this book a model of how to get the most from the case study method while minimizing the inherent costs of this approach. However, in one important aspect of his analysis in Part One of the book, Lopez does get into trouble of this sort. Here Lopez argues that the anti-unionism of many of the workers that Local A organizers encounter in their first effort to organize the Rosemont nursing home can be traced to past negative experiences with business unions. There is no reason to doubt this assessment in the Rosemont workers; Lopez documents the claim well (pp. 48–61). But he also argues that this problem is ubiquitous among unorganized workers in the United States. This claim does not derive from his case study. Rather, it derives from a cursory analysis of survey data, which the case study experience seems to validate. Lopez writes that “survey research on workers’ attitudes toward unions has consistently reported that roughly one-third of unorganized workers desire union representation—which means that a majority of workers are initially either undecided, indifferent, or ideologically hostile” (p. 13).

This is a problematic gloss on the survey data and the underlying situation that the surveys report. To my knowledge, surveys began asking non-union workers whether they would vote for a union in their workplace in November 1984.1 That first poll found the ratio that Lopez reports, but since then, as Figure 1 indicates, support has increased steadily, reaching its highest point ever—53 percent in favor—in the most recent poll, conducted in 2005.2 The scale of this increase—20 percentage points in 21 years—raises questions about the origins of these attitudes, why they are changing so rapidly in a pro-union direction, and what this implies for strategies for rebuilding union membership and power.3

Lopez argues that where prior experience of business unionism is the cause of anti-union attitudes on the part of workers, the best way to overcome these effects is for organizers to engage in one-on-one organizing conversations in which they explain that workers’ fears are valid for business unions, but not for the different type of union that is now being created. I agree that changing worker beliefs about unions through such conversations is an important contribution to movement building, even when it does not immediately result in a union certification victory. But, as Lopez recognizes, changing attitudes in this way is slow work, proceeding at the pace set by the number of union organizers available to initiate such conversations. This is one of the main reasons, I think, that he is skeptical of Dan Clawson’s (2003) argument that another upsurge in U.S. union membership and labor movement power is possible, maybe even likely.

However, if worker demand for unions is growing much faster than could plausibly be accounted for by the number of organizing conversations occurring each year,
then other forces having this effect must be in play. If that is so, then Lopez’s skepticism about the prospects for a new labor upsurge may be misplaced. Our questions become, How much of the attitude shift can be accounted for by union organizing conversations, and what other forces account for the difference?

There were about 92 million non-union workers in the U.S. workforce in 2005; 20 percent of that sum is about 18 million workers. To create an extra 18 million pro-union (but unorganized) workers in 20 years would thus require just under a million (successful) organizing conversations a year with workers who did not go on to form a union. In recent years, 350,000 to 500,000 new union members have been certified each year (Moberg 2005). With about a 50 percent win rate in certification elections, this implies that about twice that number—up to a million workers—participated in at least one organizing conversation, if unions succeeded in reaching every person eligible to vote. So, at most, perhaps half a million organizing conversations happened in workplaces where workers did not go on to win a certification election, and something less than half of these were successful in creating pro-union commitments (since otherwise the certification election would have succeeded). So, less than one-quarter (250,000) of the one million new pro-union but unorganized workers that have emerged each year for the last two decades have come out of the kind of organizing conversations that Lopez argues are essential to overcoming negative worker attitudes toward unions resulting from the past dominance of business unionism.

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**Figure 1**


What other forces have been at work? I can think of two processes that might contribute to such a change on the scale we are observing: cohort replacement and the lived experience of neoliberal restructuring. First, as those who had negative personal experiences of business unionism—potentially a very large group in the days when unions represented one-third of U.S. workers and business unionism was the dominant type—age and retire, they are replaced by younger workers. The great majority of these younger workers have no “lived” experience of business unionism—or any other kind of unionism—in their workplaces. They are exposed to negative stereotypes about unions in corporate-controlled media, but they are also more likely to hear about the unions that are growing than about those that are fading into insignificance. The unions that are growing are, for the most part, those that have successfully moved away from the business union paradigm. Insofar as cohort replacement and this kind of “natural selection” in the labor movement matter, the negative legacies of business unionism’s past dominance should steadily diminish over time.

On this analysis, younger workers should be more positive toward being in a union than older workers, other things being equal. This is what Lipset and Meltz (2004) found in their 1996 survey: 60.5 percent of U.S. non-union workers under 25 were pro-union, as opposed to 45.2 percent of those 25 or older (Lipset and Meltz 2004, 99). However, they found the same pattern in Canada—where the corresponding figures were 58.5 percent and 37 percent, respectively—even though business unionism has been much weaker in Canada. This suggests that the greater demand for unions among younger workers is not entirely or even mainly due to the decline of business unionism. One possibility is that the negative impacts of neoliberal restructuring fall disproportionately on younger workers.

This brings us to the second factor that could contribute a lot to the attitude changes that the surveys reveal: the effects of a quarter century of economic restructuring driven by neoliberal economic ideology and policy prescriptions. The cumulative negative impacts of these policies on U.S. workers have been profound: falling or static real wages, the decoupling of compensation from labor productivity growth, growing economic inequality, dramatic increases in job insecurity, and shrinking health care benefits. In short, there has been a massive shifting of the risks and other costs of accelerated economic adjustment onto workers. Unions have not been able to stop these policies from being adopted, and they have often had to negotiate concessionary contracts. Still, the union/non-union wage gap (or union “wage premium”) remains substantial in this, the high water mark of the neoliberal era. This means that, even when they are on the defensive, the advantages of union organization remain substantial.

Workers living through all this are likely to observe two things: first, unions may be problematic, but corporate employers whose power is not counterbalanced by unions and governments responsive to organized labor are a lot more problematic; and second, organized workers have more power than unorganized workers to defend their living standards, even in the current hostile environment. Taken together, these observations ought to yield a high level of worker demand for unions. Over the last quarter
century, as the effects of neoliberal policies were more fully felt by a growing number of workers, this demand should grow, other things being equal.

If these other factors are relevant to the level of worker demand for unions, can we estimate how much business unionism depresses demand, relative to the impact of these demand-enhancing factors? We can get some purchase on the relative magnitude of these forces by comparing worker demand in Canada and the United States. Insofar as business union dominance in the labor movement depresses worker demand for unions, we should find higher worker demand in Canada. To the extent that the lived experience of neoliberal restructuring intensifies worker demand for unions, this should result in higher demand in the United States because the restructuring has been more profound there.

We can measure worker demand for unions by adding the share of workers already organized into unions and the share of unorganized workers who would vote to join a union if given the opportunity. The Lipset and Meltz (2004) data, summarized in Table 1, enable us to do this for 1996. The table simplifies by designating the strength of business unionism, and the level of neoliberal restructuring, as higher or lower than that found in the same sector in the other country. Where the levels seem about the same in the two countries, this is indicated with an equal sign. Under “Strength of Business Unionism,” there are NA’s for the Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate sector because union density there is so low that no type of unionism can be regarded as strong enough to have much direct impact on how workers in that sector view unions.

In 1996, national worker demand in the two countries was very similar: 57.1 percent (36 percent in unions + 21.1 percent who would like to be in unions) in Canada and 56.5 percent (16 percent in unions + 40.5 percent who would like to be) in the United States (Lipset and Meltz 2004, 97). The implication (if these are the two main factors

Table 1
Factors Affecting Worker Demand for Unions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Strength of Business Unionism</th>
<th>Level of Neoliberal Restructuringa</th>
<th>Union Density (%)</th>
<th>Worker Demand (%)</th>
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<tbody>
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<td></td>
<td>United States</td>
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<td>Manufacturing</td>
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<td>L</td>
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<tr>
<td>Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Public Administration</td>
<td>H</td>
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Source: Lipset and Meltz (2004, 97).
Note: H = higher; L = lower; na = not applicable.
a. An equal sign indicates that the levels seem about the same in the two countries.
affecting worker demand for unions) is that if business unionism has had a deleterious impact on U.S. workers’ demand for unions in their own workplaces, the greater intensity of neoliberal restructuring in the United States has neutralized that disadvantage.

Workers respond to economic restructuring in their sector and to the nature of the unions that organize their type of work, not to national averages. So this kind of analysis ought to be done at the most disaggregated level possible. If we move to the sectoral level, we see the same pattern in most major sectors: the difference in the level of worker demand for unions in the two countries is never greater than 6 percentage points in one direction or the other. This suggests that, in these sectors too, the effects of differences in the scale of economic restructuring are about the same magnitude as the effects of differences in the dominant type of unionism.

In two sectors, however, there are much larger national differences in worker demand for unions. In construction, this may be explained by the fact that the building trades unions have often ceded sectors of the construction sector (e.g., residential housing) to non-union labor rather than organize minorities and immigrant workers into their unions. It is hardly surprising that the non-union workers in that sector are not keen on the unions that excluded them. In public administration, both countries underwent major restructuring: Canada had the larger public sector going into the neoliberal era, and it still does, but it also suffered larger cuts. With the restructuring variable largely a wash, the unusually large Canada-U.S. difference in worker demand for unions in this sector likely hinged on the greater prevalence of business unionism in the U.S. unions.

On this interpretation of the data, these two anomalous sectors tell us how big an impact differences in union character (business versus social movement) can have on worker demand for unions: at most, 10–15 percentage points. On the other hand, there is no sector of the U.S. economy in which less than 41 percent of the non-union workers wish to be in unions despite the greater prevalence of business unionism. This implies that, for most of the workers who want a union at all, any union is better than no union, even if business unions are less desirable than social movement unions. As for the non-union workers who do not want a union—and the very small share of union workers in each country who would rather not have their union—the Canadian worker demand data show that these workers think that way even when (for the most part) their lived experience of unionism has not been shaped by a labor movement in which business unionism predominates.

Summing up, I would make four points. First, Lopez is right that the type of unionism prevailing in a workplace, sector, or national economy does have an important impact both on the union supply of effective organizing campaigns and on workers’ demand for unions. Second, Lopez is also right that most workers find social movement unionism more attractive than business unions, even though some reject it because they have internalized the business union model’s norms. But third, there are other, more powerful influences on worker demand that (in most sectors) generate levels of worker demand in the United States equal to those found in Canada, despite the much greater
strength of social movement unionism in Canada. Fourth, those countervailing forces likely include the effects of neoliberal restructuring on the lived experience of American workers, especially younger workers.

What do these points imply for organizing in the United States and for the likelihood of another rapid upsurge in union membership and labor movement power in the foreseeable future? They suggest that Lopez’s critique of business unionism is stronger when we look at the union supply side of the organizing equation than when we look at the worker demand side. That is, business unionism clearly has a big negative impact on unions’ commitment to investing in organizing new members (rather than servicing existing ones) and union capacity to develop innovative and effective organizing strategies and tactics. This is part of the reason—though only part, the rest being intense employer resistance to worker organizing efforts and a legal regime that permits this resistance—why so many U.S. workers who would like to be in unions are unable to realize this desire.

The situation in the United States would be much less open to rapid change if business unionism had an equally dampening effect on worker demand for unions, but it does not. Not only is there substantial pent-up demand in spite of the past dominance of business unionism, but the structural factors that have increased worker demand over the last 25 years—cohort replacement and the intensifying experience of neoliberal restructuring—seem likely to further increase it in the short to medium run. This reality implies enormous potential for rapid growth in U.S. labor movement membership and power if, as Clawson (2003) argues, two conditions can be satisfied: first, innovative new strategies for successfully organizing workers who cannot be organized under the Wagner Act processes can be devised, and second, a new labor regime paradigm that institutionalizes these gains can be achieved through labor law reforms paralleling those of the 1930s.

What the U.S. labor movement can do to increase its chances of meeting those conditions is a topic for another time. For now, I conclude that Steven Lopez’s excellent book offers us valuable insight into the obstacles that obstruct many U.S. unions’ capacity to contribute to, and benefit from, this kind of potential dynamic. However, it is overly pessimistic about the odds that such a scenario can be realized. One important reason for this unjustified pessimism is an exaggerated sense of business unionism’s negative legacy on workers’ demand for unions and other forms of collective representation and action. When it comes to whether workers want to be in unions, it turns out that other factors are at least as important.

Notes

1. Surveys have asked for many more years than that whether people “support” unions and think they have enough (or too much) power, but not whether they would like to join one themselves. We can think of this question as getting at the “demand” for unions, as distinct from support for them. Support as well as demand for unions is now at record high levels, according to Peter Hart Associates (2005).
2. The data used in Figure 1 are from Peter Hart Associates (2005, 9). Later, I will also refer to 1996 data on this question, from Canada and the United States, from Lipset and Meltz (2004, 94–95). The Lipset and Meltz survey data show significantly higher levels of U.S. worker demand for unions in 1996 than the Hart survey does: 47 percent versus 39 percent, respectively. I do not know what accounts for this difference.

3. In relying heavily on these and other survey data in developing this critique, I am very aware of Rick Fantasia’s point that survey data about worker attitudes cannot be taken at face value, because these attitudes can change rapidly if and when workers become involved in organizing campaigns or other forms of consciousness-transforming collective action (see Fantasia 1988). I think worker desire for unions may also prove quite volatile. But as Lopez notes, it hinders the pace and scope of union organizing success if organizers have to start out facing widespread negative attitudes that employers’ anti-union campaigns can plug into; the converse is surely true as well. The point is not that these attitudes are highly stable, only that where you start from can have a substantial effect on how far, and where, you can get.

4. Think of the parallel from the Great Depression. In the preceding decade, the business unionism of the AFL unions—even industrial unions like the United Mine Workers—was hegemonic. U.S. workers could be forgiven for thinking that business unionism is the culture of all U.S. unions. But in spite of that negative experience, national awareness of the Flintautoworkers’ successful sit-down strike against GM in the winter of 1937 had a tremendous demonstration effect, sparking sit-downs in many industries all over the country. Today, Service Employees International Union victories in Los Angeles’s building services, in California nursing homes (70,000 new members), and most recently in Houston, are what workers are most likely to hear about in the news. They have not had the huge demonstration effect that the Flint strike had, to be sure, but these are still very positive stories. Moribund conservative unions whose actions might put the labor movement in a negative light seldom make it into the news at all.

5. I discuss why social movement unionism is stronger in Canada, and offer evidence supporting this claim, in Robinson (1993).

6. In “Union-nonunion Wage Differences,” Ann Foster (2000, 43) notes that union pay growth consistently outstripped that of non-union workers from 1975 to 1982, while from December 1982 through March 1999, non-union pay rose faster. Nonetheless, the U.S. union wage premium in 1982 was so large that fifteen years later, it was still 16 percent for the economy as a whole; 24 percent for machine operators, assemblers, and inspectors; and 39 percent for cleaning and building service workers.

References


