

To Defend Democracy, The Right of Workers to Organize Must be Strengthened*

By Todd E. Vachon, PhD



CWA Local 1037 members canvassing and speaking to union members about the 2023 General Election. Photo Credit: CWA 1037

Political theorists often argue that a prerequisite for a democratic society is the existence of a *demos*: a constituency with a sense of shared identity and interests in common. The construction of such a consciousness, they argue, typically occurs through participation in civic organizations such as churches, community groups, and unions. It is through these forms of civic engagement that a genuine “will of the people” is constructed. In fact, as Alexis de Tocqueville noted in his famed *Democracy in America*, the perseverance of democracy in the United States was due in part to the unprecedented degree of civic engagement by ordinary citizens. “Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of dispositions are forever forming associations,” he stated in an often-quoted passage. Unfortunately, as has been well-documented in Robert D. Putnam’s bestselling *Bowling Alone*, participation in civic organizations has been declining steadily in the U.S. for decades.

Like so many other organizations, unions have also been experiencing a decline in membership, to the point where just 11% of workers belong to unions compared to 35% in the 1950s. The decline in unions has been cited as one of the key contributors to rising income inequality since the 1980s. Less often considered is the impact it has had on democracy. Unions, the late sociologist Erik Olin Wright argued, play a particularly important role in democratic societies by providing a site for the creation of “organic solidarities” that are embedded in one vitally important sphere of most people’s lives—the workplace. Unions not only help build shared interests and capacities for participation in electoral politics, but they also bring varying degrees of democracy into the otherwise authoritarian sphere of employment. In fact, early proponents of industrial democracy, Sidney and Beatrice Webb argued that workers should have a legitimate voice in decision-making in the world of work, typically through trade unions—a notion that has since become widely accepted in most advanced capitalist democracies.

Unlike many other civic organizations, the decline of unions cannot be attributed to a lack of interest by would-be participants. On the contrary, Gallup polls have shown public support for unions to be at an all-time high and a recent study by MIT researchers found that more than half of non-union workers would like to have a union in their workplace. If so many workers would like to have a union, why do we have such a low rate of unionization?



Members of New Labor fight for and Win Temporary Bill of Rights legislation. Photo Credit: New Labor

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CWA 1037 Childcare Providers with their organizing partner NJ Communities United at the Lobby Day at the NJ Statehouse to make childcare more accessible and affordable! 2024 Photo Credit: Paul Karr

The causes for union decline have been studied at great length and some of the major explanations include globalization, deindustrialization, shifts in the labor market away from traditionally unionized occupations, misclassification of workers as managers or independent contractors, and of course increased employer hostility toward new unionization efforts, as we have seen so often in the news this past few years.

In a recent study I conducted with Michael Wallace from the University of Connecticut and Allen Hyde from the Georgia Institute of Technology, we explore the role that labor laws play in shaping unionization rates. In particular, we explore the differences between federal and state labor laws which respectively set the rules for private and public sector unionization. We asked, why is it that public sector workers who are 34% unionized are five times more likely to have a union than workers in the private sector, where the unionization rate is just 6%.

We also explored the great degree of variation in public sector unionization across the 50 states. In sum, we found that unionization rates in states with stronger labor protections more closely mirrored the percent of workers who said they'd like to have a union, whereas states with restrictive laws such as Right to Work and other laws which benefit anti-union employers had much lower unionization rates.

New labor legislation, like the PRO Act, would go a long way to adjust federal labor law and create a playing field where the percent of workers who have a union would look a lot more like the percent who want to have a one.

So, why does any of this matter?
It's the democracy, stupid.



NJ Domestic Worker Coalition waits for news of the passage of the NJ Domestic Worker Bill of Rights. Photo Credit: New Labor

It should be no secret by now that some of the first things authoritarian regimes do when coming to power is they seek to undermine independent labor unions and to eliminate the free press. It's also the case that the emergence of democracy in countries around the world happened alongside and in conjunction with the formation of voluntary associations and free trade unions.

Given the ongoing threats to democracy around the world and at home here, in the U.S., it should be clear why a strong and independent labor movement is needed. As an important vehicle for collective identity and shared interest formation as well as increased democratic practice in the daily lives of citizens, unionization plays a vitally important role in advancing both economic and political democracy. In other words, increasing the rights and protections for workers to form and join unions is good for democracy and good for America.