**MGT450**

**Labor Relations**

**Final Reflection Paper**

**Organized labor and social justice unionism:**

**A historical perspective, opportunities, and challenges**

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**ABSTRACT**

The history of organized labor goes back to the late 19th century in the U.S. Labor unions in their early age were not very effective in securing labor rights, and employers often resorted to violet means to control labor right movement. The 20th century, especially post World War II period, saw unions being more organized and methodical in their approaches. The union density or membership peaked to about 35 percent in the 1950s, but it has dropped to below 10 percent in recent years. Since 1970s, the decline in union density has coincided with a decline in the middle class. Globalization and shift from manufacturing to service industry have played a role in the declining union density. This paper discusses unions’ dynamics in the historical context and as to how unions’ revival can be achieved, i.e., challenges being faced and the opportunities available. Finally, the paper finishes with a conclusion on how research on organized labor has changed this writer’s perception of unions with respect to their positive role in the society.

The history of organized labor is almost two hundred years old but the labor laws and formal union movements started only in the 20th century. As far as the early history on such issues go, *Rerum Novarum* (Leão, 1891), the social justice doctrine written by the Pope in light of many social injustices, laid out the inequalities that were present in society at that time. These inequalities ranged from economic inequalities, inequalities in human rights, and the inequalities that are a result of matters that are out of an individual’s hands. This piece of literature is indicative of the view that Church held in regards to the social and economic sphere. It also debated when it would be appropriate for the Church to step in on matters of inequalities, as it held a duty to the people as stated by its commandments. Unfortunately, the plight of labor continues to be a low priority for the political powers to be. The labor movement (unions) reached peak density or membership the 1950s, but in recent decades, organized labor has seen a tremendous decline. This paper discusses a brief history of organized labor, the current environment for unions, and unions and middle class. The challenges faced by labor unions and opportunities for the movement’s revival are discussed, too.

Unions were not very common until late in the 19th century, following the Second Industrial Revolution, and even the earliest of major union groups were not very successful. Domhoff (2013) reported that despite the failures of early union groups to provide better workplace rights to its members, it laid the foundation for future labor union groups to also fight for social justice for their union members. This was especially important in post Civil War times, as the inability of employers to provide rights to the ever expanding and skilled workforce led to many violent confrontations. The labor ecosystem had gotten so bad, that at one point, “Corporate leaders put their efforts into creating stronger military forces to control workers when necessary” (Domhoff, 2013). This shows the condition of the relations between employer and employee were strained beyond belief. During those early times unions were weak, but the high handedness on part of the employers proved that there was a need for stronger unions who could legitimately bargain and fight for the employees.

 The 20th century history of social justice unionism is a bit more dynamic, yet it showed that a large amount of work was necessary for workers to have their rights fought for. The fight for these rights initially started out as unions locally, but began to spread across the country in the form of national union associations. According to Hermanson (1993), in the early 20th century labor history, the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) was once one of the largest labor unions in the U.S., and the first one that had a mainly female membership. As time progressed, so did the realization for further social rights, and thus a higher emphasis was placed on securing those rights. American Federation of Labor (AFL) was one of the first successful union movements in the U.S. and it was described by Van Kleeck (1934) as “the most significant organized effort of American wage-earners to supply an answer to the question of the worker's place in the national economy.” The average worker finally had a voice to represent them in the national political process. This was seen as the first major progress of making employers realize that the solution to their problems was at the negotiation table, and that they could not ignore the demands of the employees any longer due to expected backlash from the AFL. In spite of the many successes, the plight of the labor movement is best summed up by Dinerstein & Neary (2002, p. 13) as, "the intellectual history of the 20th century is the history of avoidance of labor as a political category and its recreation as a sociological device which denies its critical capacity." When judged on the basis of union density data for 2012, the U.S. is ranked almost at the bottom of all the industrialized nations and Mexico (*see the graphic in the sidebar,* *on Union Density*). It is noted that since 2012, the union density has further dropped, to under 10 percent.

In modern times, Social Justice Unionism has been dubbed as a movement that requires more from the typical union agreements that are about benefits and workplace matters, and instead demands that additional rights (such as human rights) are included in the agreements as well. Scipes (2014) notes that, "Based on union member mobilization, social movement unionism is being projected positively and presented as the way that U.S. Labor as a whole should develop in the early 21st century." Traditionally, unions mostly fought for the workplace rights of the labor, and they rarely addressed human rights unless those rights were being violated within the workplace. Baines (2010, p. 497) reports, "an official commitment to social unionism does not necessarily mean a commitment to community participation, or the skills to develop it." The fight for human rights can be extended through political activist movements, a departure from the traditional labor rights work.

 The rise in union density or membership, at least in part, contributed to the expansion of the middle class in the U.S. in the latter half of the 20th century. As the middle class continues to shrink, we see an increasingly greater disparity between the middle and the upper classes in society. (*see the graphic in the sidebar on middle class incomes, 1970- 2010.*) Owing to this disparity, the need for unions on wider scale cannot be overemphasized. Alternatively, having a higher percentage of college graduates could help to strengthen the middle class. Geoghegan (2014, p. 130) says, “More college automatically makes us more competitive or even better off." However, Geoghegan also argues that improving the number of college graduates from 30 to 40 percent would take too long, and that eventually it is not a guarantee of higher pay, which would translate into a better middle class. Another problem with not having strong unions is the resulting negative impact on social mobility, that is, the ability of lower class labor to move upward to middle class.

Social justice unionism and democracy are powerfully intertwined due to the fact that members exercise their democratic right in union elections. The social justice unionism movement has often found itself fighting alongside many other causes, so that it can have a stronger platform to push forward its demands in the political sphere. Reiss (2005, p. 36) notes that, “Social movement unionism, at its most basic level, is the belief that in order to revitalize, the American labor movement will have to partner with other social movements – peace, feminists, immigrant rights, and environmentalists, among others – and look beyond its bread and butter issues of wages and working conditions.” These issues are part of the broader democracy in the society and prove that the connection that the social justice unionism movement has with the democratic system is deep, and will continue to deepen as unions back politicians and legislation that will benefit them and their members. Aryee & Chay (2001, p. 155) note that, "the training of union members in the application of principles of organizational justice increased citizenship behavior on part of the union members." Yates (2009, p. 12) noted that, "our government has been increasingly under the thumb of corporate interests. The failure of the organized labor to provide a counterweight to this has allowed a corporate-political alliance to sweep away the most of the safety nets." If the matters were not already worse for the organized labor, the U.S. Supreme Court declared corporation as “individuals.”

One of the major challenges that the organized labor faces is the lack of political backing for unions, and this is true even for the Democratic Party too. Although, Democrats have been in power for exactly one half of 40 years since President Jimmy Carter, the union density has continued its downward slide. In spite of many promises during election campaigns, even the Democrats have done nothing of significance for the labor. Geoghegan (2014, p. 36) is blunt in saying that, “Democrats pay no attention to labor.” This means that odds are stacked against the unions as far as the political will and backing is concerned. Robinson (1994, p. 659) noted that one of the challenges that the social justice unionism movement faces is “the degree to which central federations have the authority to negotiate national collective bargaining terms and conditions, and to control striker funds.” Robinson further noted that, “The higher the level of centralization, the greater the potential for ‘political exchange’ between organized labor and governments.” This is already occurring for some unions, as they seem more intent on supporting political candidates, than on actually fulfilling its duty to its members. Another major challenge is the flight of manufacturing industry to other countries, mainly Mexico, China, and India. The lower labor costs, at the expense of labor rights, are chiefly responsible with this phenomenon. (Stories of sweat shops especially in China are well documented and reported in the media). Further, it was also noted by Robinson (1994) that “it becomes more difficult to organize new union members by traditional methods, setting in train a vicious circle of declining union density and labor movement power resources.”

In spite of daunting odds against organized labor, there is still hope and opportunities for its revival. The labor movement needs to reflect on if it is following its purpose of ultimately serving union members or just following its own desire to be a politically involved entity with a lower emphasis on its union members. Too often we have seen unions and their social movements falter because of their unwillingness to change. Rose & Chaison (2001, p. 34) have noted that “the ability of a union or union movement to adapt and survive; to continually adjust its goals, its practices, its priorities, its alliances in relation to the working class and the economic and socio-political world in which it operates, so that it continues to defend workers’ interests.” The labor movement must focus on wage disparity between genders (women make about 80 cents for each dollar men make). This could bring in women rights groups to support unions and help their broader goal of helping labor. Ross (2008, p. 141) reported that, “the perception of the labor movement as the servant of *narrow* or *special interests* is waning, and the public accepts that unions have both the capacity and responsibility to advocate for broader social justice." The use of social media to organize labor is another avenue that should be exploited. For example, if a company continues to deny union formation that company’s products could be boycotted. It is a lot easier and least costly to update such information on the social media rather than traditional pleas in newspapers or flyers.

An opportunity also exists for forming a third party by the labor, e.g., Labor and Justice Party, to tackle the odds in the current political scenario. It is to be noted that labor and justice parties with various names are active politically in many countries. In the past, attempts of forming a formidable third party have failed but labor movement is positioned to have a success due to sheer number of voters in the labor classes. I believe it is high time labor realized that no political party is looking for their interests. Yates (2009, p. 12) notes that, "our government has been increasingly under the thumb of corporate interests. The failure of the organized labor to provide a counterweight to this has allowed a corporate-political alliance to sweep away the most of the safety nets." The idea of a Third Party is a radical approach which will take few elections to for the intended results but it will sure move the system in labor’s favor. Finally, trade unionists can contribute significantly to the corporate social responsibility debate. For example, as Justice (2002, p. 13) notes, "they can remind governments and business that collective bargaining and social dialogue are the private mechanisms that have been the most important and effective means for society to maximize the positive and minimize the negative social consequences of business activities."

In conclusion, I would like to reflect on my perception of unions before and after going through this Labor Relations course. Although I had somewhat of a neutral viewpoint about unions previously, my perceptions have changed after learning some relevant facts. First and the foremost is the historical contribution of the labor movement to better the plight of labor in the 19th and 20th centuries. The second fact that I learned is the declining of middle class in the U.S. that coincides with the decline of union density, which from a high of 35 percent in the 1950s is to a low of around 11 percent recently. Third, I learned about the social justice unionism, which goes much beyond the traditional labor unions concept. While we see the middle class decline, it should not negatively impact unions’ ability to bargain for the social rights that are ever so more important in the social and political system today. In the preceding paragraphs, I have reflected on these issues with supporting literature and my thoughts. In summary, there are many challenges that organized labor faces but there are many opportunities for the revival of the labor movement. The revival and sustained growth of unions will only happen if they adapt to the ever changing socio-political environment in the U.S.

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