

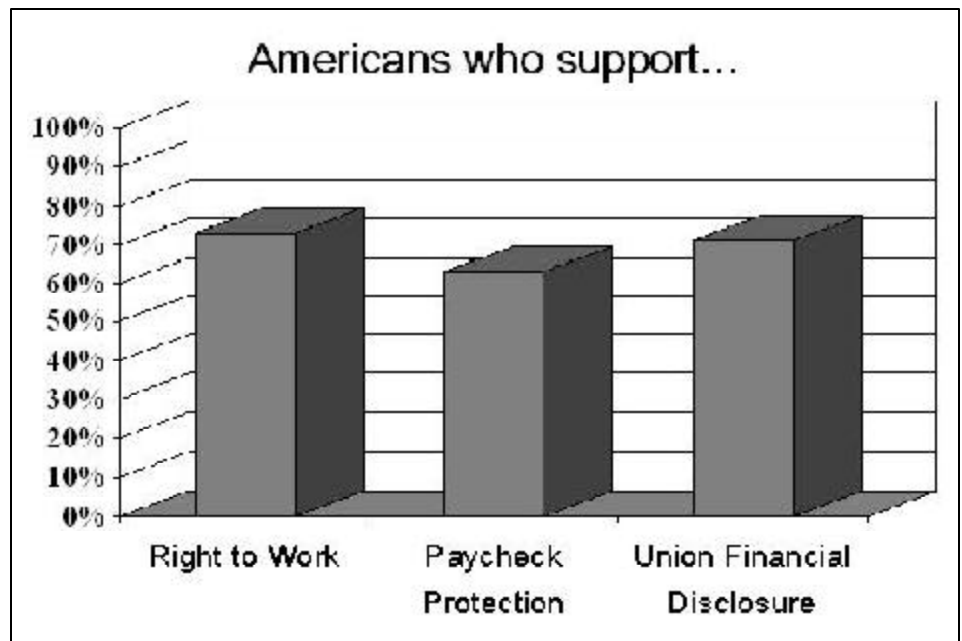
Do Americans Support Labor Unions?

By David Y. Denholm

Summary: A new Zogby poll shows that, although Americans generally support the idea of labor unions, large majorities also support reforms such as “Right to Work” laws, “paycheck protection” and strict financial disclosure requirements. What’s more, these reforms are also supported by union members. Can unions resist change for very long?

Labor unions have enjoyed a long history of public support. Despite the dramatic decline in private-sector union membership and the unions’ apparent inability to mobilize voter support in this year’s Democratic primaries, 63 percent of Americans in a new nationwide Zogby poll answered that in general, they approve of labor unions.

But labor leaders face stiff opposition on key questions of union reform—not only from the general public but also from their own members. These questions include whether workers should be free to choose or decline union membership (“right to work”), who should control whether union dues are used for political purposes (“paycheck protection”) and whether there should be extensive finan-



cial disclosure of union expenditures. How these issues are decided could dramatically affect unions’ influence and future membership.

These reforms are moving forward at both the federal and state levels. Unfortunately, however, union leaders are devoting much of their energy to fighting their progress. As this resistance to reform becomes more apparent, public approval of unions may weaken. What will this mean for unions, especially private sector unions?

Good to Be Liked

The American public’s attitude toward labor unions is paradoxical. On the one hand, a consistent majority of Americans say that “in general” they approve of labor unions. At the same time, the public’s

confidence in union officials is lower than its regard for lawyers and only slightly higher than for used car salesmen.

Politicians are sensitive to public opinion. If labor unions were universally despised, members of Congress would not hesitate to strip them of their special privileges and legal immunities. But the public’s general support for unions helps explain why unions continue to exercise a political influence far in excess of their numbers despite the steady decline for over 50 years in union membership as a percentage of the total workforce. In many areas of the country, a labor union’s political endorsement is still considered a sign that a candidate supports the interest of “workers.”

Union officials are not blind to this public impression. Even though only 12.9 per-

June 2004

**Do Americans Support
Labor Unions?
page 1**

**Labor Notes
page 6**

cent of employees are union members (2003 data), union leaders typically describe their own special interests as the interest of all “working families.” The AFL-CIO cited polls before the 2000 election suggesting that union households supported Al Gore over George W. Bush by a 63-32 percent margin. This was meant to support the labor federation’s claim that it had endorsed the choice of working families. However, Leo Troy’s new book, *The Twilight of the Old Unionism* (M.E. Sharpe, 2004), indicates that, “Among nonunion workers—74 percent of the total population of workers—52 percent voted for Bush and 44 percent for Gore.” Because of the eight-point difference, Troy suggests that Bush actually may have received the majority of votes of “working families.”

Organized labor has good reason to be concerned about the public’s good opinion. The AFL-CIO commissioned extensive polling research by Louis Harris Associates in 1984, and a comprehensive review of the literature also was prepared by Seymour Martin Lipset and published as *Unions In Transition* (Institute for Contemporary Studies, 1986). However, since 1936 it has been the Gallup poll that periodically asks the basic question: “In general, do you approve or disapprove of labor unions?” The results indicate consistent and significant public support for unions that is largely unaffected by current events. The percentage of approval has ranged from the mid-70s to a low of 55

percent in 1981, which may be attributed to that year’s strike by PATCO, the air traffic controllers union.

Last year the Public Service Research Foundation (PSRF), with a grant from the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, commissioned Zogby International to do a more thorough study on public attitudes towards labor unions. The result of that research was released in March 2004. This study is unique because it includes a large “over-sample” of union members. Because of the growing influence unions have on the size, cost and quality of public services, we wanted to have a clear picture of the opinion union members have of unions. And because almost half of all union members are government employees, we also wanted a representative sample of public employee union members.

Zogby International interviewed 1,207 randomly-selected persons in a poll conducted from February 5, 2004 to February 9, 2004. It found that 63 percent of the general public “approved” of unions. This finding is consistent with recent Gallup poll findings and lends confidence to the Zogby poll’s other results. Not surprisingly, there was a difference of opinion on this question between union members and the general public. Eighty-three percent of union members approved of

unions. Among union members who are government employees, 89 percent approved of unions.

Furthermore, 54 percent of those surveyed believe unions provided a necessary protection for individual workers. However, 80 percent of union members and 85 percent of government employee union members took this view.

Interestingly, the responses to this question are consistent with the decline in private sector union membership. PSRF’s closer analysis of the results finds that among all respondents, nearly half (49 percent) those who are employees on private payrolls picked Statement A. They believe unions are no longer needed. However, 72 percent of government employees believe unions are still needed.

Right to Work

While a majority of the public approves of labor unions and there are significant levels of support for the view that unions are still needed, the Zogby survey reveals certain vulnerabilities that unions suffer. They are fundamental to the way unions operate.

The survey asked whether an employee should be compelled to join or support a union as a condition of employment. This is often referred to as the “Right to Work” issue.

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In general, do you approve or disapprove of labor unions?

	<u>Total</u>	<u>Union Members</u>	<u>Government Union Members</u>
Approve	63	83	89
Disapprove	31	13	10
Not sure	7	4	1

Please tell me which statement, A or B, comes closer to your opinion.

A: There was a time when unions were needed, but the need for them has now passed.

B: Unions are necessary, because without them, individual employees would be powerless.

	<u>Total</u>	<u>Union Members</u>	<u>Government Union Members</u>
Statement A	42	19	13
Statement B	54	80	85
Not sure	4	1	2

Officials of organized labor can't stand Right to Work laws, which they regard as a serious threat to their power. Labor unions don't hesitate to spend their members' dues, mainly acquired through legal compulsion, to oppose right-to-work laws. When Right to Work referendum was on the 2001 ballot in Oklahoma, organized labor outspent the bill's proponents by 4 to 1. Nevertheless, 54 percent of state voters approved the proposal.

Seventy-three percent of all survey respondents agreed that employees should be free to choose whether or not to join a union. Consistent with other research findings, a 54 percent majority of union members also support Right to Work.

Paycheck Protection

Bills and ballots that require union members to give their support before labor officials can spend union dues contributions on political causes or candidates are generally called "paycheck protection" measures. A 1998 California ballot measure would have given union members the right to object to funding union political and ideological causes. Labor unions spent more than \$20 million to defeat the proposal, outspending proponents by about 9 to 1.

Sixty-three percent of the respondents support giving union members the right to object to the use of their dues for political purposes. Among union members, 61 percent agreed.

Financial Disclosure

Another example of the gap in opinion between union officials and union members is on the question of whether to require unions to disclose their financial activities in detail.

Labor Secretary Elaine Chao has called for revision of the regulations governing union financial disclosure under the Labor Management Reporting and Disclosure Act. She has drawn strident union opposition. The old regulations provide very little information that union members can use to determine how their union dues are spent. The new regulations fall far short of full disclosure, but they are a substantial improvement. Labor unions have opposed the new regulations by filing law-

suits to block their implementation. These legal actions are ongoing.

The Zogby survey asked respondents whether they support strict financial disclosure requirements for labor unions. A large majority (71 percent) of both the general public and union members said they do.

Membership Interest

If a union were available to represent them, would individual Americans want to

join it? The answer to this question has long-term implications for organized labor as it struggles to build its membership.

Among respondents to the Zogby survey who are not already union employees, 53 percent said they are "not likely" to join a union if given the opportunity. Only twenty-three percent said joining a union was "very likely," and 22 percent replied "somewhat likely." That's not a very encouraging scenario for union growth.

Please tell me which statement, A or B, comes closer to your opinion:

A: Individual workers should be free to decide for themselves whether or not to join or support a union, and nobody should be required to join or support a union as a condition of employment.

B: No one should be a free-rider. If workers benefit from union representation, they should be required to pay their fair share of the cost of union representation.

	<u>Total</u>	<u>Union Members</u>	<u>Government Union Members</u>
Statement A	73	54	58
Statement B	25	45	41
Not sure	2	1	1

A: Union members should not be required to contribute through their union dues to political or ideological groups with which they disagree.

B: Unions have a responsibility to represent all their members and should not have to ask each member individually how to spend treasury money.

	<u>Total</u>	<u>Union Members</u>	<u>Government Union Members</u>
Statement A	63	61	57
Statement B	33	37	40
Not sure	4	3	3

A: Government ought to do more to protect union members from corrupt union officials. Unions should be required to give detailed reporting of union finances to discourage abuse.

B: There are already laws on the books to deal with corruption. Giving detailed financial reports would be overly burdensome on unions.

	<u>Total</u>	<u>Union Members</u>	<u>Government Union Members</u>
Statement A	71	71	63
Statement B	22	26	32
Not sure	7	4	5

Even among government employees a plurality—46 percent—reject the idea of joining a union.

Political affiliation is a leading indicator of likelihood to join a union. PSRF's closer analysis of the Zogby survey results finds that among all respondents, 60 percent of Democrats but only 25 percent of Republicans said they would be likely to join a union if given the chance.

The survey indicates other significant differences between the general public and union members, especially government union members—differences that may affect interest in joining a union. For instance, 36 percent of the total respondents describe themselves as Democrats compared to 62 percent of those who are government union members. Thirty-six percent of the respondents self-identify as conservative or very conservative compared to only 20 percent of union members. Only 25 percent of adults describe themselves as liberal or very liberal, compared to 43 percent of government union members.

Political Influence

As they represent fewer and fewer workers by collective bargaining, labor union officials have had to rely on their political influence over state and federal legislators to achieve their goals. That has led unions to undertake major efforts to influence how Americans vote.

The Zogby survey found that slightly more Americans are “more likely” (30 percent) to support a political candidate based on a union endorsement than are “less likely” (23 percent). However, a plurality (45 percent) report that a union's endorsement has no impact on their vote.

Among union members, a union endorsement has somewhat more influence. However, only 53 percent say they are more likely to support candidates because they are union-backed. More than a third (37 percent) are not influenced by union political endorsements.

An Attitude Problem

There is little doubt that opposition from union officials has been the major obstacle to labor reforms, including legislation permitting Right to Work, paycheck protec-

If you had a choice, how likely would you be to join a union?

	<u>Total</u>	<u>Private-Sector Employees</u>	<u>Public-Sector Employees</u>
Very likely	23	19	22
Somewhat likely	22	21	30
Not likely	53	58	46
Not sure	3	2	2

Characteristics of Survey Respondents: Political Party

	<u>Total</u>	<u>Union Members</u>	<u>Government Union Members</u>
Democratic	36	59	62
Republican	33	25	25
Independent/ other	23	13	12
Not sure	8	3	1

Characteristics of Survey Respondents: Ideology

	<u>Total</u>	<u>Union Members</u>	<u>Government Union Members</u>
Progressive/ Very liberal	8	10	15
Liberal	17	26	28
Moderate	30	34	25
Conservative	32	19	18
Very Conservative	4	1	2
Libertarian	3	7	11
Not sure	6	2	1

Please tell me whether you would be more likely or less likely to vote for a political candidate based on an endorsement from [a labor union], or it makes no difference.

	<u>Total</u>	<u>Union Members</u>	<u>Government Union Members</u>
More likely	30	53	52
Less likely	23	10	12
No difference	45	37	36
Not sure	2	0	0

Please tell me if you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with the following statement: Unions represent the interests of their entire membership, not just those of the union leadership.

	<u>Total</u>	<u>Union Members</u>	<u>Government Union Members</u>
Agree	57	77	83
Disagree	39	22	16
Not sure	4	0	1

tion and increased union financial disclosure. The Zogby survey shows that union members and the general public are far more supportive of reform on these issues. So why don't they blame union officials for the lack of progress on union reform?

The problem is one of public perception. Many conservatives often complain that union officials represent only themselves, not their members. Unfortunately, their opinion finds little support among the general public or union members. When asked whether unions represent the interests of their entire membership and not just those of the union leadership, 57 percent of the general public agreed and 77 percent of union members agreed. Agreement was even stronger (83 percent) among government union members.

Conservatives who support union reforms might even take a look at those who call themselves conservatives. Forty-two percent of self-described conservatives also agree with the statement that unions represent their entire membership. And 37 percent of those who consider themselves "very conservative" hold this opinion too.

Perhaps the word "represent" is the stumbling block. Look at union candidate endorsements and their positions on public issues and you may well conclude that unions do not "represent" their members' preferences or interests. But for a union member, representation is primarily regarded as job-related; it is not understood to pertain to a union's position on issues and candidates.

Still, union officials' heavy-handed opposition to labor reform is likely to backfire. Most Americans and even most union members want choice and transparency in union operations, and they have become increasingly frustrated by a recalcitrant union leadership.

There is one other thing that ought to concern union leaders. Public opinion supported unions in the late 1950s when the laws were changed to grant public sector unions monopoly bargaining privileges similar to those enjoyed by unions in the private sector. But total union membership and union membership as a share of private-sector employment has been falling for a half-century. That means successful and growing unionism is increas-

ingly a public-sector phenomenon. What happens when the Baby Boom generation reaches maturity? The cost of entitlement programs will skyrocket and competition for scarce tax resources will escalate. That may set the stage for a new look at unions and a historic reversal in public approval of unions.

Who can doubt who will lose when the public has to balance union interests against the public interest?

For instance, as competition for tax resources increases, public opinion could swing against wasteful, pro-union practices like prevailing wage laws and project labor agreements that increase the cost of public works construction. These public policies artificially shore up unionism in the construction industry, which has more than twice the membership as a percentage of the workforce than the total private sector. The construction unions have traditionally been the more conservative wing of the union movement. Reducing their influence in the union movement will allow it to drift further leftward. This could further reduce public support for unions.

Another scenario: cutbacks in pensions for public employees as competition for tax resources increases. Public policies on public pensions were established long ago when there was a common perception that public employment did not pay as well as equivalent jobs in the private sector and generous pension benefits were needed to attract people to public service jobs. That perception persists, but the growing reality is that public employment actually pays better than the private sector. The pension policies adopted in a different era are now creating a generation of "pension millionaires." Some public employees are retiring at an early age with retirement benefits exceeding what they earned when they were working.

Today we are experiencing a mini-crisis as pension fund managers attempt to adjust to the realities of the stock market after the extended bull market of the 1990s. Many state and local governments are being required to reduce the level of public services in order to fund pension systems. We are approaching a time when public officials may have to choose between generous employee pensions and

being able to provide public services like education and fire and police protection. Government employee unions will struggle with the conflicting pressures of maintaining retirement benefits and employment and compensation. The vast majority of voters, not being beneficiaries of generous public pensions, will likely opt for public services and entitlement programs and demand pension reforms. If union leaders balk, this could set the stage for an even further reduction in public support for unionism.

These are just two of the public policy questions that will come to the fore as competition for tax resources between public services and entitlements increases. No matter what happens, there is no doubt that public opinion on labor unions will play a key role in the outcome.

David Y. Denholm is President of the Public Service Research Foundation in Vienna, Virginia. The full results of the Zogby poll can be found at www.psr.org.

Please remember Capital Research Center in your will.

Labor Notes

Teamsters Anti-Corruption Team Quits, Criticizes Hoffa

A former federal prosecutor and 20 other investigators and attorneys involved in the Teamsters' internal anti-corruption program have resigned their posts. They complain that union president James P. Hoffa is blocking or dragging his feet on corruption investigations. "Rather than creating an atmosphere in which serious allegations are resolved expeditiously and fairly... [Hoffa has created] the clear impression that the union is slow to react to corruption issues and is insensitive to witnesses' justifiable fears of retaliation," wrote Edwin Stier, Teamsters internal ethics officer, in a resignation letter obtained by the National Legal and Policy Center (NLPC). Stier complained that Hoffa resisted imposing a trusteeship on Houston Local 988 when investigators suspected kickbacks, refused to meet with Stier about organized crime links in Chicago and failed to act on a union code of conduct, "an essential element" to demonstrate that the Teamsters can operate independent of federal oversight. G. Robert Blakey, a departing attorney, has a theory for Hoffa's stonewalling: "The younger Hoffa is conflicted because he knows that organized crime killed his father. But like his father, he knows that to be president of the Teamsters it is necessary to deal with locals that are connected to organized crime. I think he caved in to some people in Chicago."

FEC Allows 527 Groups to Affect 2004 Election

The Federal Election Commission has rejected a proposal to regulate union-led Section 527 groups before the 2004 election, giving an immediate boost to Democrat-leaning groups that are raising millions of dollars in "soft money" donations. America Coming Together, led by former AFL-CIO political director Steve Rosenthal, and its partner the Media Fund have already raised and spent more than \$42 million, including \$23 million worth of anti-President Bush television advertising. Although FEC regulation of the groups is advocated by Republican party officials, two of the three Republican FEC commissioners voted against new regulation, at least for anytime soon.

Report Documents Union Corruption, Blames 'Monopoly Privileges'

"What a back-porch light is to moths, compulsory unionism is to con artists and Mafia bosses," alleges a new report by journalist Carl Horowitz for the National Institute for Labor Relations Research. The report, "Union Corruption in America: Still a Growth Industry," looks at major union scandals in recent years including embezzlement at the Washington, D.C., teachers union and union ties to the Mob. Horowitz calls for Right to Work laws allowing workers to invite in or organize rival unions when existing unions are corrupt.

Genovese Family Accused of Controlling NYC Union

An 83-count indictment of 22 members of the Genovese Organized Crime Family charges them with creating and using Local 530 of the Operative Plasterers and Cement Masons union to establish control over the New York City area's drywall industry. For various alleged acts of racketeering, extortion, fraud, tax evasion and other offenses, the indictment seeks at least \$5.2 million.

Air Traffic Controllers Lobby for Training Funds

Hundreds of air traffic controllers from across the country descended on Washington, D.C., last month to ask Congress to hire and train more controllers. The AFL-CIO claims there will be a shortage of up to 50 percent in the next decade. The controllers' legislative conference featured AFL-CIO president John Sweeney, Sen. James Inhofe (R-OK), Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D-NJ) and Federal Aviation Administration chief Marion Blakey.