

15.2: Putting It Together- Union–Management Relations

The workplace changed radically—and for the better—since the early 1900s. Worker and union member rights seem to be entrenched in law and public opinion. But of course, nothing is permanent. Conservative interests have been pouring millions of dollars into disinformation and union member opt-out campaigns and court challenges. The Trump administration’s policies and his appointment of conservative Neil Gorsuch to the Supreme Court has changed the political and legal landscape. The Supreme Court’s Janus decision also impacted power dynamics, stripping the union of funding and influence.

Clearly, this is a difficult time for unions. Worker security clauses and minimum wage campaigns are controversial at best. If unions don’t become agents of innovation and value creation, they may lose their public support majority. Another open issue is whether unions can adapt to changes in business technologies and the nature of work. As The Heritage Foundation research fellow James Sherk notes: “Today’s workers want—and expect—employers to recognize their unique skills and abilities. But general representation ignores individual contributions.”^[1]

Recent Google protests (events we will discuss in Module 15: Corporate Social Responsibility) suggest that these workers are more likely to organize independently of unions—rapidly, and highly effectively. Unions have also been ineffective in advancing the cause of members in some traditionally union industries. For example, although roughly 70% of teachers participate in unions or employee associations^[2], there has been a significant increase in employment insecurity and a lack of progress in achieving pay and benefit equity. A recent analysis by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) published the following findings:

- “Contingent” faculty positions (including both full- and part-time positions) represent over 70% of all instructional staff appointments in American higher education.
- The excessive use of—and inadequate compensation and professional support for—faculty in contingent positions exploits these colleagues.
- The turn towards cheaper contingent labor is largely a matter of priorities rather than economic necessity.^[3]

Given these findings, it’s not surprising that the percentage of teachers who participate in unions has been declining for the last 20 years.

If unions are to survive conservative assaults and declining membership trends, they need to reinvent themselves and prove their value in the current operating environment. A failure to actively engage in improving business, member and societal outcomes is likely to cost unions the support they need to effectively counter the increasing concentration of wealth and power and serve as an agent of a more democratic economy and society.

1. Sherk, James. "[Unions Need to Reinvent Themselves](#)." The Heritage Foundation. September 2, 2013. Accessed July 22, 2019. [↩](#)
2. Loewus, Liana. "[Participation in Teachers' Unions is Down, and Likely to Tumble Further](#)." Education Week. October 12, 2017. Accessed July 22, 2019. [↩](#)
3. "[Background Facts on Contingent Faculty Positions](#)." American Association of University Professors. Accessed July 22, 2019. [↩](#)

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