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US Labor Studies in the Twenty-First Century: Understanding Laborism Without Labor

Jake Rosenfeld

Department of Sociology, Washington University in St. Louis, St. Louis, Missouri 63130, USA; email: jrosenfeld@wustl.edu

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Abstract

In recent years, labor studies has flourished even as labor unions in the United States have continued their long-term downward trajectory. One strain of this research has situated the labor movement, and its decline, at the center of economic inequality's rise in the United States. Another has explored the labor movement's interconnections with political dynamics in the contemporary United States, including how labor's demise has reshaped the polity and policies. This body of scholarship also offers insights into recent stirrings of labor resurgence, ranging from the teachers' strikes of 2017 to the Fight for 15 minimum wage initiatives. Yet the field's reliance on official union membership rates as the standard measure of union strength, and on official strike statistics as the standard measure of union activism, prevents it from fully understanding the scope and durability of worker activism in the post-Wagner age.

INTRODUCTION

By most measures, these are among the worst of times for organized labor in the United States. The official private sector unionization rate sits at 6.5%, although the actual rate is likely lower.[1] This is the lowest percentage on record, approximating the rate that preceded passage of the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) in 1935. The NLRA, commonly known by the name of its chief Senate sponsor, Robert Wagner, enshrined collective bargaining rights into federal law. Union opponents are pressing to push the rate down further, successfully passing right-to-work legislation in Wisconsin, West Virginia, Kentucky, and Michigan in the past few years. In the public sector, slightly more than one-third of workers belong to a union or similar professional organization. These rates held relatively steady for decades but now are under assault across the country. In Wisconsin—the first state to grant collective bargaining rights to state workers—the attack emerged with Governor Scott Walker's Act 10 in 2011, resulting in a public sector density decline of 60% since 2010. In the summer of 2018, the US Supreme Court issued its ruling in the *Janus v. American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, Council 31, et al.* (2018) case, effectively making the entire public sector right-to-work. As of this writing, the exact consequences of the decision remain unknown, but we can safely assume they will not be good for public sector unions.

Labor's current predicaments have sparked a resurgence of scholarly interest in the consequences of organized labor's demise. Indeed, these are among the best of times for US labor studies, especially studies engaged with the interrelationships between organized labor, the state, and inequality. Scholarship emerging from a wide array of disciplines—sociology, political science, labor economics, legal studies, and elsewhere—has advanced our understandings of the central role labor decline has played in exacerbating inequality in our economy and polity. It has also uncovered the various ways political dynamics shape and are shaped by the relative strength of the labor movement. I cover this emerging body of scholarship in the section titled Part 1: Reconsidering Unions and Inequality.

In the section titled Part 2: Laborism Without Labor?, I show how this scholarship helps us understand current developments involving labor, especially the political and workplace activism to help low-wage workers, and, more recently, public school teachers. The recent forms and scope of union activism harken back to the pre-Wagner period, as Milkman (2013) argues. Indeed, many in the labor movement have concluded that the NLRA labor relations system is "a dead letter for all practical purposes" (Milkman 2013, p. 647). This move away from traditional collective bargaining should be interpreted as a sign of labor's weakness, not strength (Luce 2015, p. 75). Nonetheless, many of these recent efforts have delivered dramatic, widespread victories for working Americans, most notably in the campaigns to raise the minimum wage in dozens of states and cities and to name and shame major corporations into increasing pay and improving working conditions. Were it not for our expanded understanding of unions' influence on nonunion workers, we would miss the fact that so many of the recent low-wage worker campaigns today are union initiatives, delivering union victories, although they have not produced new union members. Current research also provides key insights into other developments, most notably the enormous teacher walkouts in the spring of 2018. Yet there are limits to what labor can achieve in this turn away from Wagner-era collective bargaining, as recent scholarship from the power resource theory in labor sociology emphasizes. In an era of diminished union memberships, increasing power requires forming strategic partnerships with other progressive organizations—including so-called alt-labor organizations—as well as cultivating elected officials sympathetic to labor's cause.

[1] Misclassification of union status in surveys biases the unionization rate upward as fewer and fewer respondents belong to unions; see Card (1996) and Western & Rosenfeld (2011, pp. 521–22) for details.

But all is not perfect in the land of labor studies. The field's reliance on official union membership rates as the standard measure of union strength, and on official strike statistics as the standard measure of union activism, prevents us from anticipating many recent developments and understanding their scope. The section titled Part 2: Laborism Without Labor? ends with a call for a new data collection effort better suited to illuminate important labor relations developments in the post-Wagner age.

PART 1: RECONSIDERING UNIONS AND INEQUALITY

Unions and Market Inequality

We are a long way from the first generation of union studies arguing that unions exacerbated economic inequality (see Friedman 1962 for a canonical statement). An accumulating body of research on unions and economic inequality has advanced empirically and theoretically in ways that highlight union decline as a key factor underlying the rise of the second Gilded Age. The empirical advances have gone beyond the methodological. For many years, quantitative investigations into unions and inequality were hampered by certain data limitations (see Wilmers 2017 for an innovative use of union election and investment data). One was temporal: Available microdata only went as far back as the early 1970s, a decade and a half into labor's decline, and the beginning of the end of the Great Compression period of low inequality. What we were left to study was how an already-weakened labor movement contributed to rising inequality, forcing researchers to infer backward about how a strong labor movement might have helped foster the relative economic equality of the post–World War II decades.

Farber et al.'s (2018) analysis fills in decades of missing data to provide the first comprehensive examination of unions and inequality across both the low- and high-inequality regimes of the mid-to-late twentieth century. The authors take advantage of Cornell University's recent release of Gallup opinion polls dating back to the 1930s that contain information on household union membership along with other core correlates of wages. The results are unambiguous: Household union membership is associated with a 15–20% wage premium relative to otherwise similar nonunion households across the 80 years of their data (Farber et al. 2018, figure 5). Moreover, selection into unions changes over time in ways that suggest unions' contribution to reducing various types of economic inequality was larger than previously known. At the beginning of their series, memberships were comparatively white and well educated. During the Great Compression decades, organized labor's member base was disproportionately nonwhite and less educated, revealing that "unions were conferring a substantial advantage to what would otherwise have been low-income households" (Farber et al. 2018, p. 3).

Skill-biased technological change, globalization, and automation stand as prominent alternative explanations for rising inequality in the United States and other advanced economies. If union decline is simply a story about these broader forces of import penetration, offshoring, and automating (for a counterargument, see Rosenfeld 2014, ch. 8), then there is no direct connection between a weakened labor movement and rising economic inequality. Emerging research challenges this argument. First, there is the empirical finding of dramatic membership declines in industries largely immune from automation and outsourcing, such as transportation and construction. Declines across the occupational spectrum point to a broader set of explanations for unions' present state than commonly acknowledged in much of the economic literature on inequality (see Eidlin 2016 for an analysis of the United States' lack of a labor party, which left US unions prone to later political attacks).

Second, recent studies include controls for these other disequalizing factors. Kristal & Cohen's (2017) industry-level analysis focuses on inequality trends within 43 US industries between 1969 and 2012. They include a direct measure of technological change to assess whether workforce computerization or various shifts in labor market institutions, such as declining unions, has a greater effect on within-industry, over-time changes in inequality. They find that declining unions and the falling real value of the minimum wage explain roughly half the growth in the log 90/10 ratio. Technological change, meanwhile, only explains about one-fourth of the rise (Kristal & Cohen 2017, figure 4). Supplementary analyses indicate that import penetration is positively correlated with inequality in manufacturing industries during the first few decades of their data series. Importantly, the union effect remains significant and negative even with this added control. Wallace et al. (2011, p. 26), however, provide a more mixed picture of unions' effect on inequality after adjusting for a set of globalization proxies, including a measure of foreign direct investment. Their metropolitan-area analysis finds that union density is positively correlated with lower-end inequality, presumably because union members are concentrated in the middle of the earnings distribution, and high densities pull incomes away from the bottom.

Even at the labor movement's peak in the United States, most workers were unorganized. For labor decline to star alongside other prominent explanations of rising inequality, its influence must have extended beyond the membership ranks. A growing body of research suggests it did, and continues to do so, in the remaining pockets where unions are strong. These spillover channels vary, and we now see that they extend beyond the economic threat an organized firm poses to an unorganized one. Here, recent theoretical advances in the field have opened up new areas of inquiry, widening our understanding of how unions constrain inequality in the United States and other advanced economies. Western & Rosenfeld (2011) argue that as a broad countervailing force to corporate power, unions operate within and beyond the marketplace, helping to establish wide-reaching pay norms that set the standard for maximum and minimum wages. They do this through political channels (described in the next section) but also through their cultural role as a prominent arbiter of what is considered fair in the economy (see VanHeuvelen 2018 for an empirical test of these moral economy effects).

Rosenfeld et al.'s (2016) study focuses exclusively on union spillovers to nonunion workers, modeling the relationship between industry-region union strength and the wages of nonunion employees. Analyzing data on millions of private sector workers across three-and-a-half decades, the authors estimate that wages for nonunion men without a college degree would be 8% higher if unions remained as strong today as they were in the late 1970s. Two decades of union decline had already occurred prior to their benchmark year (1979), suggesting that, if anything, their estimates are a conservative account of how a powerful labor movement influenced the wages of unorganized workers. Union effects on nonunion women are not as large, but results do suggest that unorganized women workers also suffered as a result of deunionization from 1979 onward. For nonunion women without a college degree, estimates indicate that weekly wages would be 2–3% higher absent union decline in the private sector. In a follow-up study, Denice & Rosenfeld (2018) disaggregate union effects on nonunion, private sector pay by occupation. Their models include direct measures of import penetration, average education, and lagged employment rates at the occupation-region level. Results (Denice & Rosenfeld 2018, tables 2 and 3) suggest a strong, positive relationship between union density and nonunion pay, even after adding occupation-region fixed effects.

Typically, quantitative investigations into unions and inequality model central tendencies of large sections of the working population. A common approach examines how union membership is associated with mean weekly wages for nonmanagerial workers, adjusted for standard correlates of pay such as education, age, industry, and occupation. Sometimes researchers disaggregate their samples by skill levels, modeling, for example, the effect of union membership or some contextual measure of union strength on the mean wages of workers without a college education (Card 2001).

But the noncollege educated still encompass a huge swath of the workforce. One of the more pathbreaking recent developments in labor studies is a focus on how organized labor influences the tails of the income and wealth distributions. Whereas the previously dominant view held that union effects were confined to working- and middle-class Americans, given that unions focused their organizing on these workers, here too we see how widening our focus on organized labor has opened up new avenues of research.

Brady et al. (2013), for example, examine how state-level union strength correlates with household working poverty rates, finding a strong, negative relationship. The effect size of state union strength exceeds that of common poverty-alleviating policies, as well as measures of state economic performance. What is all the more remarkable about the finding is that since "the vast majority of workers near the poverty line are unlikely to be unionized" (Brady et al. 2013, p. 875), the effect of unions on working poverty must be indirect. This study adds to the growing body of evidence that organized labor, when and where it wields significant power, influences the pay of the unorganized—including those households at the bottom rungs of the income distribution. The authors are unable to tease out the precise pathways through which this spillover occurs, leaving an important arena for future research.

Rising economic inequality in the United States has many dimensions, but a dominant one is the dramatic growth at the very top of the distribution, especially over the past two decades. Thus, for labor decline to be a central factor explaining inequality's rise, it must be connected to the growing concentration of income and wealth among the lucky few in our winner-take-all economy. Emerging research suggests it is, although data limitations—especially the lack of firm-level data with union information (Southworth & Stepan-Norris 2009)—prevent strict causal inferences.[2] Shin (2014) links executive pay to industry-level union strength for nearly 200 large US firms between 1996 and 2005. His measure of union strength is negatively associated with chief executive officers' (CEOs') salary and bonuses, though uncorrelated with stock options. Shin's findings are consistent with Volscho & Kelly's (2012, table 1) study on rising top-1% income shares in the United States (but see Enns et al. 2014, table 1). Analyzing six decades' worth of data, the authors find that falling unionization rates help explain increases in the share of income going to the top 1%, alongside other factors such as the partisan balance in government and top income tax rates.

Other research has taken a more macrocomparative view of rising top-end incomes and union decline. Emerging from unlikely quarters—the International Monetary Fund—Jaumotte & Buitron (2015, p. 4) challenge the "widely held view… that changes in labor market institutions affect low- and middle-wage workers but are unlikely to have a direct impact on top earners." Their sample consists of 18 advanced economies—the United States included—over the 1981–2010 period. They model within-country, over-time changes in top 10% income shares for each country and find that union density has a significant, negative effect on this measure of inequality. The results are robust to the inclusion of controls for globalization, deindustrialization, technological change, top marginal tax rates, and other important determinants of high-end incomes (Jaumotte & Buitron 2015, tables 2 and 3). Overall, the authors find that union decline explains a full 40% of the total rise in top 10% income share over the three decades covered by their data, although its contribution to rising top-end income in the United States appears more modest (Jaumotte & Buitron 2015, figure 7). Jaumotte & Buitron (2015, p. 4) conclude that "…lower union density may reduce workers' influence on corporate decisions, including those related to executive compensation."

[2]As a reviewer noted, we await research directly testing whether shareholders led corporate managers to embrace antiunion tactics and then rewarded those who were successful in their efforts.

Unions at the Ballot Box and Beyond

> Unions are demonstrably political organizations.
>
> —Ahlquist (2017, p. 426)

Alongside the research described above is a flourishing body of scholarship enhancing our understandings of the role of unions in US politics. There has been a resurgence of research from the power resource perspective (Korpi 1985), finding that labor's effectiveness in reducing inequality is contingent on the broader political environment. Jacobs & Myers (2014, p. 752), for example, demonstrate that "stronger unions could successfully resist policies that enhanced economic inequality only before Reagan's presidency" in their macro-level investigation into rising inequality in the United States between 1950 and 2010. This finding that labor's political resources vary by political context is echoed in Jacobs & Dirlam's (2016) state-level analysis of rising inequality, which shows that union strength is negatively related to inequality, although the effect size is quite modest. This modest union effect likely stems from their use of data largely restricted to the post-Reagan neoliberal period. Lin & Tomaskovic-Devey (2013, table 2) also find that aspects of unions' equalizing influence vary by period. In an analysis of industry-level inequality, their models indicate that union decline is positively associated with labor's share of income, except in the most recent period of 1999 to 2008 (see also Kristal 2010).

There is also a growing body of work uncovering how union decline has influenced both "political representation and policy output" (Ahlquist 2017, p. 426). In terms of policy output, Bucci's (2018) research shows how state-level union strength correlates not only with pretax and transfer inequality, but also with states' level of redistribution. Analyzing data on US states between 1976 and 2014, she decomposes inequality into a labor market (pre-tax and transfer) component and a government transfer component. Similar to other investigations, hers finds that union strength reduces market inequality. But even after controlling for market inequality, union strength is associated with lower post-transfer inequality, underscoring the important role strong unions play in advocating for robust transfer programs (Bucci 2018, table 1). Her models also adjust for states' policy liberalism, indicating that union effects on transfers are not simply proxying for the progressivism of the state's legislature.

Flavin (2018) provides some clues as to how unions have such a strong influence on redistribution. In general, higher income translates into more policy responsiveness from one's elected officials (Bartels 2008, ch. 9; see also Gilens 2014). High-income constituents, in turn, support policies that benefit their own economic self-interest, revealing how political inequality exacerbates economic inequality. Flavin is interested in what role, if any, unions may play in the relationship between citizens' policy desires and the actual policy outputs of their legislatures. His estimates suggest union strength at the state level lowers the distance between low- and middle-income citizens' political beliefs and the policy outcomes of their state. In his models (Flavin 2018, table 2), the union strength measure has the largest effect on equality of political representation—larger than the fraction of Democrats in the legislature and the level of income inequality in the state.

What about the labor movement's influence on political representation? Intriguing new research suggests unions directly shape who represents us by sending members into politics. Sojourner (2013; see also Carnes 2016, table 2) finds that an occupation's unionization rate is positively correlated with the number of state legislators from that occupation. States with high unionization rates for construction workers and primary school teachers, for example, have a greater number of legislators who were teachers or worked construction compared with states without much union presence in those occupations.

One of the most robust findings from the voter turnout literature is that turnout increases as you climb the socioeconomic ladder. Durable organizations such as churches and labor unions can help level this form of political inequality by motivating members to vote. Flavin's results hint at unions' mobilizing influence among lower-income citizens. Leighley & Nagler (2007, table 2) directly examine this relationship, finding that the union membership effect on turnout is larger for lower- and middle-income respondents than for higher-income respondents. Rosenfeld (2014) also finds strong class effects in unions' abilities to turn members out to the polls: In a sample of private sector workers, the adjusted turnout difference between union members and nonmembers with less than a high school degree exceeds 11 percentage points. Among workers with a college degree or more, it is only 4 points (Rosenfeld 2014, figure 7.5). Unions' mobilizing effect extends beyond the ballot box into a wide range of civic behaviors. Examining data from various surveys spanning 1973 to 1994, Kerrissey & Schofer (2013; see Kerrissey & Schofer 2018 for a comparative perspective) find that membership is associated with higher likelihoods of protesting and with membership in other political organizations. These effects are especially large for respondents with lower levels of education.

As Ahlquist (2017, p. 420) emphasizes, we can be fairly confident that self-selection is not driving these findings from the literature on unions' politicizing effects, given the relatively unique nature of US labor law. Self-selection into unions based on political beliefs or a propensity for civic endeavors is exceedingly difficult in a context where unions are rare, where membership is entirely job-related, and where once-established unions do not usually face competition from other unions for members.

But not all unions are created equal, and with thousands of locals spread throughout the nation, they are not going to have uniform political effects. Southworth & Stepan-Norris (2009, p. 309) argue that "unions have unique histories and varying propensities for militancy, democracy, political engagement, and organizing of new workers," and yet research on unions often elides these distinctions. A set of recent studies help answer calls for greater attention to interunion variation by focusing on organizational differences between unions and how these affect political outcomes, although progress remains halting given the lack of comprehensive time-series, organizational-level data on labor unions (Cornfield 1991, Southworth & Stepan-Norris 2009).

Terriquez (2011) finds that the civic skills unions inculcate in their members extend into realms outside of formal politics, including participating and exercising leadership in school organizations. But only activist unions that directly engage their members on an ongoing basis achieve these outcomes. Ahlquist & Levi (2013) compare the International Longshore and Warehouse Union and Waterside Workers Federation to the Teamsters and International Longshoreman's Association to examine how certain unions develop a broad-minded civic consciousness among their members while others do not. Top officials of the two dock unions in their sample succeeded in generating substantial buy-in among their memberships for the union's activist agendas. The leaders of their comparison cases, meanwhile, stuck with delivering results for their members only, never advocating for or advancing a broader agenda. The authors' explanation for the divergent outcomes rests on leadership's ability to deliver the goods for members and establish an accountability structure through which the rank and file can hold their leaders accountable. An activist union with a social justice orientation can then capitalize on the trust and goodwill established among members to fight for broader social justice initiatives.

The mobilizing capabilities of unions have motivated a ferocious political backlash. Emerging evidence suggests many of these antiunion political efforts have been effective at hampering the labor movement's political capacities. Previously, research was mixed regarding the political and economic consequences of right-to-work legislation. This was rather surprising, given the enormous sums spent by both sides of the proposed legislation. New research suggests that while the economic effects may be relatively minor, the political consequences of right-to-work are anything but. Feigenbaum et al. (2018) compare counties across right-to-work borders to isolate the causal impact of this antiunion law on a range of political outcomes. After controlling for year and border-pair effects, they estimate that Democratic Party vote shares fall by 3.5 points in right-to-work counties following passage of the law, most likely due to the demobilizing effects of the legislation. Right-to-work forces unions to expend more resources shoring up their membership base, leaving less money and organizing muscle for political efforts. Union campaign contributions decline along with voter contact initiatives (Feigenbaum et al. 2018, p. 6). The findings from the Feigenbaum et al. study dovetail with a recent examination of the effect of right-to-work passage in Oklahoma in 2001 (Eren & Ozbeklik 2015). Using a synthetic control method, the authors estimate that passage of the law did not affect employment or average wage rates. Private sector density, however, did decline by 1.4 percentage points following passage compared with their synthetic comparison state.

The recent research surveyed above documents the various ways in which strong unions helped constrain political and economic inequality. Today's weakened labor movement is a key reason why we have an economy characterized by runaway incomes and wealth at the very top, and stagnant or declining pay for the broad middle. Corporate power in politics, meanwhile, remains unchecked without the countervailing influence organized labor once provided. This much is clear.

PART 2: LABORISM WITHOUT LABOR?[3]

Wither the Strike?

> It really is a wildfire.
>
> —Andrew Beaver, middle school math teacher in Louisville, Kentucky, quoted by Goldstein (2018)

On the morning of February 22, 2018, nearly 20,000 teachers across West Virginia never made it to work. There was no scheduled holiday on that winter Thursday. Instead, it was the start of a 9-day work stoppage that shuttered every public school across the state. The action was the culmination of boiling frustration and emergent activism among a teacher core long used to having their voices ignored. The broader context makes the West Virginia teacher walkout all the more impressive. The strike was illegal and occurred in a right-to-work state whose overall density rate had plummeted by more than 50% during the past three-and-a-half decades. Yet the solidarity generated spread quickly and widely—often beyond the control of unions desperately trying to keep up with members' growing activism. When the rank and file rejected a tentative deal worked out by union leaders and the governor, the walkout became an unsanctioned, or wildcat, strike.

And it was wildly successful. The teachers returned to work on March 7, having won a 5% raise; the creation of a new board to oversee health care, with a guarantee of three union seats on it; and, from the Republican governor, promises to reject various antiunion bills winding their way through the legislature (McAlevey 2018). The West Virginia teacher walkout was also contagious. Restive teachers in Oklahoma—another right-to-work state—soon threatened to follow suit, motivating the state's Republican-dominated legislature to raise taxes preemptively in order to pay for increased school funding. It was the first tax hike in the state in nearly 30 years (Carlson 2018). It also was not enough to satisfy the state's education workforce, which walked out on April 2, closing half the state's schools. Here too, the rank and file led on key strategies while the unions followed. The Oklahoma Education Association initially gave the legislature until the end of April to provide new educational funding or face a walkout. Pressure from the ranks succeeded in pushing the union to move the deadline up (Goldstein & Dias 2018). Less than two weeks later, the teachers returned to work, $6,000 richer, while other school staff enjoyed raises of $1,250, the

[3] Credit goes to Richard Yeselson (2016) for the first formulation of this concept.

result of nearly a half a billion dollars in new funding for education agreed upon by the legislature (Campbell 2018).

Simultaneous with the action in Oklahoma, teachers in neighboring Kentucky marched by the thousands in the state capitol to demand increases in the education budget and decry changes to their retirement system. They won the funding debate when Republicans within the legislature joined with Democrats to override the Governor's veto of a spending bill raising revenue for education (Schreiner & Beam 2018). Further west, teachers in Arizona watched as their colleagues in West Virginia, Oklahoma, and Kentucky extracted concessions from their states as a result of labor unrest. On Thursday, April 26, they had seen enough, shutting down over a thousand schools for a week and winning themselves a sizable raise from the state's Republican governor (Levitz 2018). Educators in other states soon joined the swelling movement, including in Colorado, where teachers walked out for the first time in a quarter century.

How do we explain these actions? Most occurred in deeply conservative states that granted public sector unions little, if any, collective bargaining rights, including the right to strike. Their targets were not administrators—that is, management, as in a typical private sector work stoppage—but state policymakers. All were substantial labor victories, countering prior research showing that strikes in the contemporary era "hardly occur anymore, and the ones that do rarely result in a victory for workers" (Rosenfeld 2014, p. 4; see also Rosenfeld 2006). Revisiting Conell & Cohn's (1995) emphasis on the importance of imitation in understanding strike activity suggests that the success in West Virginia provided key information to teachers in other states agitating for greater pay and resources. Kimeldorf's (2013) analysis of what proved successful for union growth a century ago also provides clues for understanding the outcomes of the teacher strikes. Teachers are hard to replace, in part because they perform "time-sensitive tasks that rendered replacement workers economically impractical" (Kimeldorf 2013, p. 1033).

As it stands, however, prevailing wisdom among many social scientists and legal scholars is that the strike "now serves as a source of *employer* bargaining power," with the threat of permanently replacing workers usually enough to scare off a union from triggering a walkout (Pope 2004, p. 528). As Milkman (2013) argues, the shift to a postindustrial economy placed many of the core industrial unions at a strategic disadvantage vis-à-vis employers: Automation and outsourcing caused millions of union jobs to evaporate, while employers used the threat of globalization and technological change to restrain union demands and worker activism in those jobs that remained. Striking in these industries was, and remains, risky business. But teachers cannot be outsourced or, as of yet, automated. In the spring of 2018, teachers struck, tens of thousands of them, and they won.

They were not the only ones, nor were they the first major uprising of American workers in recent years. Throughout late 2012 and 2013, journalists documented rising US labor unrest (Semuels 2012) as workers in other occupations beset by stagnant pay and largely immune to outsourcing and automation walked off their jobs in city after city. With Occupy Wall Street protests serving as the initial catalyst for a renewed fight for higher wages and lower inequality, workers and organizers targeted ubiquitous brands such as McDonald's and Walmart known for their low pay, high turnover, and unpredictable schedules (Luce 2015, p. 74). Both the industries and employees involved in these actions challenge prevailing understandings of workplace actions in the contemporary United States. First, the walkouts occurred in fast-food and retail, two major industries within the broader service sector characterized by low union density and, partly as a result, low strike rates. And, in fact, the workers who struck were nearly all nonunion. The dozens of strikes that resulted from this combination of nonunion workers in unlikely industries bear little resemblance to the highly choreographed, often long-lasting work stoppages once common in the United States. For starters, they were short—usually no more than a couple of hours or a day. They rarely engaged all workers at an establishment. As a result, they often failed to shut down the workplace.

Were these really strikes? At Walmart, only a tiny fraction of the retail behemoth's enormous domestic workforce ever participated in a work stoppage, and the efforts failed to unionize even one Walmart associate. For the labor historian Nelson Lichtenstein, calling these types of actions strikes was "a little bit of a devaluation of the word" (quoted in Eidelstein 2013). Yet what unites these actions is that they involve workers leaving their jobs and making demands of management, often with direct support from traditional unions. The United Food and Commercial Workers launched the OUR Walmart (Organization United for Respect at Walmart) campaign in 2010 as an effort to shame the giant retailer into improving the working conditions of its 1.5 million associates. Rolling strikes between 2011 and 2014, culminating in Black Friday protests and walkouts in 2013 and 2014, arguably contributed to recent decisions by the company to increase pay and the predictability of work schedules (for the challenges organizers face at retail behemoths such as Walmart, see Reich & Bearman 2018). As Milkman (2013, p. 661) suggests, these types of actions can be seen as part of a broader strategic repertoire that bears a strong resemblance to the pre-Wagner labor movement. And unlike many traditional strikes in recent years—announced in advance by a group of unionized workers, highly circumscribed in terms of precipitating causes—these ended up delivering.

Back to the Ballot Box

Successful strikes are not the only recent example of rising laborism without labor (Rosenfeld 2016): union-backed initiatives delivering tangible victories for millions of American workers at the same time that unions themselves struggle to survive. Another tactic in the strategic repertoire that labor has used to great recent success is the political campaign. The small city of SeaTac, Washington, home of the Seattle–Tacoma International Airport, was an unlikely launching pad for one of the most dramatic, durable, and widespread worker victories in decades. What began there in 2011 as a union organizing drive by a Service Employees International Union (SEIU) local would converge with the energy and activism of the growing walkouts at retail and fast-food establishments in the fall of 2013 to produce the first tangible victory from the labor actions that had spread throughout the year.

Organizers in SeaTac initially threatened recalcitrant employers to put a minimum wage increase on the ballot if the companies would not bargain over unionization. The employers gambled they could overwhelm the union in a political campaign, and the battle shifted from a union organizing fight to a minimum wage referendum. The proposed minimum wage of $15/hour would represent a 60% increase over the minimum wage in Washington and would be more than twice as high as the federally mandated minimum wage of $7.25. The organizers did not grab the target out of thin air; the emergent Fight for 15 movement united various city-level efforts at fast-food and retail establishments around a tangible goal for the workers and organizers involved. Yet nowhere had these labor actions translated to a $15 minimum, until the voters of SeaTac very narrowly approved the $15 referendum. (The ballot measure passed by 77 votes out of approximately 6,000 cast; see Johnson 2013.) Quickly, the effort spread, with Seattle becoming the first major US city to raise its minimum wage to $15, shortly followed by San Francisco and Los Angeles.

All told, tens of millions of low-wage workers would receive the first sizable boost to their paychecks in decades. Behind these campaigns in city halls and statehouses across the country were labor unions. In 2011, for example, SEIU committed $60 million and 1,500 organizers to change the debate about the US economy. The campaign, Fight for a Fair Economy, had two core goals: highlight and seek political fixes for the unfair wages and working conditions plaguing workers at the bottom rung of the economic ladder, and bring many of these workers into labor's fold (Rosenblum 2017, p. 388). The campaign soon merged with other community organizations in New York, Seattle, and elsewhere, fighting together for "$15 and a union." The first part of the SEIU Fight for a Fair Economy campaign—the publicity effort and the fight for $15—proved wildly successful, as noted above. It is the second part that has proven a tougher sell.

Thus, we come to the paradox of rising laborism without labor. A narrow conceptualization of what unions do for nonunion workers, one focused on the threat unionized establishments place on nonunion competitors, would miss the fact that these initiatives for low-wage, nonunion workers are union-driven and should be counted as union wins. Theoretical and empirical advances that widen the analytical lens have allowed researchers to trace a number of avenues through which organized labor influences the wages and working conditions of nonunion workers. A well-traveled avenue in recent years is the ballot box. Even Mickey Mouse is not immune from these union-backed political initiatives. A current drive spearheaded by a coalition of unions aims to raise the pay of Disneyland workers in Anaheim to $18/hour (Roosevelt 2018). Indeed, in the post-Wagner age, none of these recent high-profile labor victories have been won through the collective bargaining process, the traditional route unions used to improve the wages and working conditions for their members during the mid-twentieth century's Wagner era.

Unions have pursued other policy routes beyond voter initiatives. For example, in 2015 union-led pressure motivated the governor of New York, Andrew Cuomo, to convene a wage board to study the state's fast-food industry. Mike Fishman, secretary-treasurer of SEIU, sat on the three-person board, which would go on to recommend a $15 minimum hourly wage for the nearly 200,000 fast-food workers in the state (the following year, the governor would sign a law increasing the state's minimum wage to $15/hour for all workers, not just those in fast-food establishments).

Nearly two decades ago, Taylor Dark suggested that "there is no causal force *requiring* that declining union density should inevitably translate into declining union political power" (Dark 1999, p. 21). The labor successes noted above give credence to Dark's suggestion, as they all occurred against the backdrop of historically low densities. Yet recent research from the power resource perspective points to limits about what labor can achieve politically in the post-Wagner age. National- and state-level studies suggest labor's ability to constrain inequality is restricted to times and places where labor retains political strength (Jacobs & Dirlam 2016, Jacobs & Myers 2014, Lin & Tomaskovic-Devey 2013). It follows that labor's initial and most dramatic political successes have occurred in remaining union fortresses (Yeselson 2013) such as Seattle and New York City.

What's So Alternative About Alt-Labor?

In an era of diminished memberships, increasing labor's political power requires strategic partnerships with other progressive organizations. Here, too, we see parallels with the pre-Wagner era when labor unions often partnered with like-minded groups, and today some unions have begun to blur the jurisdictional boundaries and seek strategic alliances with alt-labor organizations (worker advocacy organizations that are not formally labor unions). Worker centers, for example, date back decades, growing from a handful in the early 1990s to more than 200 by 2010 (Fine 2011). These organizations, often rooted in disproportionately immigrant, low-income industries such as fast-food and domestic service, provide legal aid to workers, lobby cities and states to end exploitative labor practices, and run publicity campaigns against offending employers. Prominent examples include the National Domestic Workers Alliance—now with more than three dozen affiliates across the country—and the Restaurant Opportunities Centers United (ROC-United). The tactics employed and campaigns run by these organizations often mirror recent union efforts like OUR Walmart and Fight for 15. They are not unions in the traditional sense: They often engage classes of workers—such as independent contractors—legally barred from joining traditional unions. Many lack dues-paying structures and rely on funding from a mix of foundations and individual donors.

Yet recently, unions as traditional as the Teamsters have moved into the alt-labor sphere, creating the Western Washington Taxicab Operators Association (WWTCOA) to bring drivers for Uber and other rideshare services into labor's fold. The WWTCOA is not a formal union, since these workers are classified as independent contractors and thus ineligible for union representation (currently, an effort to lift this restriction and unionize rideshare drivers in Seattle is tied up in court). And in 2011 the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) voted the New York–based National Taxi Workers Alliance (NTWA) its 57th organizational member. The NTWA, an association dating back to the late 1990s, became the first worker center formally affiliated with the union confederation (Bernhardt & Osterman 2017, p. 98). Two years later, NTWA's leader, Bhairavi Desai, was elected to the AFL-CIO's executive council (Flanders 2013). The organization, with its 15,000 members, "engages in virtually all forms of typical union bargaining" (Gaus 2014, p. 247) despite existing outside of the NLRA's purview.

These and other developments suggest it may no longer make sense to conceptualize alt-labor organizations as residing outside of the labor movement's tent. The AFL-CIO seems to have arrived at a similar conclusion, as has SEIU organizer and key architect of the SeaTac minimum wage battle Jonathan Rosenblum, who recently wrote that many of these alt-labor organizations "are quintessentially unions: they are organizations of workers united to fight for the things that they need" (Rosenblum 2017, p. 392). Labor scholars have begun drawing explicit parallels between today's fights for economic justice and pre–New Deal efforts, specifically between Progressive-era reform groups advocating on behalf of exploited immigrant female labor and many of today's alt-labor organizations (Milkman 2013). Milkman & Luce (2017, p. 163) suggest that the proliferation of alt-labor organizations and their attendant political victories "stand out as central components of organized labor's response to the Great Recession." Even predating the Great Recession, we see alt-labor organizations, often partnering with formal unions, scoring a range of political victories, including the enactment of anti–wage theft laws (Doussard & Gamal 2016) and administrative rulemaking changes that benefit taxi drivers in New York City (Johnston 2018).

What Does It All Add Up To?

As Bernhardt & Osterman (2017, p. 109) recently asked, "What does it all add up to?" It is time for sociologists and other labor scholars to weigh in. To do so effectively requires new data collection efforts. There is accumulating evidence that union-led efforts to raise wage floors have borne fruit (Gould 2018; Gould & Shierholz 2018, figure *a*). What we lack is systematic, quantitative evidence that recent worker activism at fast-food establishments, retail giants, and public schools across the country represents a significant uptick in strikes compared with prior years. The union-organized walkouts at Walmart and fast-food chains will not register in our official strike statistics, the ones relied on by labor scholars to study trends in and effects of strikes in the modern era (Dixon & Martin 2012, Martin & Dixon 2010, Rosenfeld 2006). Since the Bureau of Labor Statistics stopped keeping track of work stoppages involving less than 1,000 workers in the early 1980s (missing the vast majority of strikes as a result), labor researchers have utilized data provided by the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service (FMCS). But the FMCS universe captures only official work stoppages—those reported to the agency by the local union on behalf of its members during a contract dispute as specified under section 8(d) of the NLRA. Short, improvisational strikes (Oswalt

2016) by unorganized workers that often do not shut down production go uncounted in these data. A search of the FMCS 2004–2014 work stoppage database produced no results for Walmart, McDonalds, or any of the other fast-food and retail establishments targeted by the Fight for 15 and OUR Walmart campaigns. Illegal strikes of the type that shook statehouses and emptied classrooms in the first half of 2018 are similarly unlikely to appear in these official data.

We also lack data on the percentage of US workers who are active in alt-labor organizations. This shortcoming is due to our official unionization data source—the Current Population Survey (CPS)—only asking about membership in a labor union or other professional organization. A decade back, Southworth & Stepan-Norris (2009) called for the collection of detailed organizational data on unions—especially longitudinal data. That need remains, and we should not ignore alt-labor organizations in these efforts. We need a measure of what fraction, if any, of our standard measure of union density is composed of alt-labor members. How a member of, say, the NTWA would answer the CPS question on union status remains unknown. Whether that taxi driver would even be asked that question is also unknown, since technically he or she is an independent contractor, and self-employed workers are excluded from the CPS's union question (Bur. Labor Stat. 2017, p. 4). How would a member of the 18,000-strong NTWA, one of the 25,000 restaurant workers ROC-United claims to represent, or any of the membership of the other 200 worker centers and other alt-labor organizations respond? At this point, we do not know.

Three types of new data collection efforts are essential. The first is an updated and expanded union question that recognizes the emerging reality of labor relations in twenty-first century America. The universe of the CPS question on union membership should be expanded to include self-employed workers, since many of the emergent alt-labor organizations target workers, such as truck and taxi drivers, who are officially classified as self-employed. Second, aside from the standard union membership item, an additional question should be added, asking respondents if they have had contact with or used the services of a worker center or other organization that provides legal or other assistance to workers. Third, our strike or work stoppage data repository needs updating. The FMCS should continue to collect information on official work stoppages, but large-scale data sets such as the CPS should poll workers on whether they or anyone else at their workplace participated in a work stoppage over the previous year. Such information would arm researchers with the means to assess how sizable worker actions have become, what fraction of the US workforce participates in them, and how much working time is lost due to them annually.

CONCLUSION

In recent years we have learned much about what labor has lost in the transition from the Wagner to the post-Wagner age. We have a broad and deepening understanding of the manifold consequences of labor's demise. The first part of this review focuses on the interdisciplinary, growing body of research placing unions, and their decline, as a central force behind rising economic and political inequality. Indeed, the influence of US unions goes even further: Other recent research finds that unions reduce variation in hours worked (Finnigan & Hale 2018), unions lower the likelihood of permanent rather than temporary layoffs (Jung 2017), and union members report higher job satisfaction in the United States than nonmembers (Hipp & Givan 2015, table 3). It is now abundantly clear that union decline has exacerbated many of the challenges facing non-elite workers in the United States today—stagnant pay, unpredictable scheduling, and an economy tilted toward the interests of CEOs and other shareholders.

Yet there are stirrings of a revival, although one that bears little resemblance to the Wagner age labor movement. Recognizing recent worker victories as union victories requires a broader conceptualization of the various ways in which unions influence the wages and employment conditions of workers, especially nonunion ones. Here, research by Ahlquist (2017), VanHeuvelen (2018), Western & Rosenfeld (2011), and others offers conceptual tools for analyzing the political, normative, and economic pathways through which unions today continue to deliver victories for workers. Given that membership levels are at historic lows, these victories are circumscribed by periods and places where unions retain some strength, as power resource theory maintains. Declining membership has also motivated labor unions to form strategic partnerships with alt-labor organizations and other progressive groups. As Milkman (2013, p. 645) summarizes, the twenty-first century, post-Wagner labor movement, "has increasingly come to resemble its counterpart of a century ago, with a diversity of organizational forms; a broad strategic repertoire that includes boycotts, living wage campaigns and brief demonstration strikes; as well as a wide set of alliances with community-based organizations, advocacy groups, progressive activists and even intellectuals."

What does all the recent laborism add up to? It has not resulted in new members, at least in traditional unions, and how to reverse what is now more than a half-century of declining memberships remains the largest question labor faces in the post-Wagner age. Data limitations mean that we lack direct evidence showing the extent that workplace activism has increased, although case study accounts certainly suggest it has. We also do not know the size of alt-labor organizations, nor do we know whether their growth has helped stem membership losses among traditional unions. A concerted scholarly focus on these recent developments and new data collection efforts are crucial next steps if labor studies is to continue flourishing. They are also important steps to ensure that labor supporters within the academy have useful recommendations for unions and other worker-based organizations struggling for pathways out of the abyss.

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