

America Needs Union Competition

Written by Mark W. Hendrickson
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I agree with President Barack Obama that we need more labor unions. However, I disagree with his approach.

Full disclosure: I have been a dues-payer to both the United Auto Workers (UAW) and the National Education Association (NEA) unions. My sympathies are heavily tilted toward the interests of the men and women who do the work that makes America go.

For that reason, I strongly oppose the dishonestly named "Employee Free Choice Act," which aims to deprive workers of secret ballots when voting for or against union representation. You don't benefit workers by stripping them of basic democratic protections.

Team Obama made another anti-democratic, anti-worker, pro-union move on May 10. The National Mediation Board (with an Obama appointee providing the tie-breaking vote in a two-to-one decision) overturned 75 years of established policy by ruling that aviation and railway workers can unionize without the approval of a majority of members. Now, union organizers only need to obtain a majority of votes actually cast. By manipulating who votes, as well as when, where, and how, union organizers will be able to thwart genuinely democratic decisions.

There are better ways to increase the number of labor unions. Let us revise existing labor laws to make it easier for unions to form in ways that increase the number of unions from which American workers could choose.

First, let's amend the Clayton Antitrust Act of 1914. That law was designed to prevent monopolies, but it explicitly exempted labor unions. Let's repeal that exception.

We generally agree that monopolies are bad and that competition is good. Why do we end up with the best cars, the best cell phones, the best personal computers, etc.? Simple: The relentless pressures of competition drive companies to provide more value for fewer consumer dollars. And what explains the abominable performance of many public schools, the higher death rates in the United Kingdom's nationalized health-care system, and the lousy quality of American currency (Federal Reserve Notes having lost approximately 98 percent of their

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purchasing power in less than a century)? Equally simple: The lack of competition to which these government-mandated monopolies or near-monopolies are exposed. Introduce competition into these markets, and quality would improve markedly.

The same principle holds true for labor unions. If unions had to compete to represent workers' best interests, they would be more accountable and responsive to the workers whose dues they take.

For example, think of Republican teachers who feel that the benefits they receive from their mandatory NEA dues are outweighed by the NEA's practice of spending those dues overwhelmingly in support of liberal Democratic causes. These teachers would be free to join a competing union that supports GOP initiatives, or, alternatively, a completely apolitical union.

Think of the job-security issue: Given the abject failure of the UAW and other monopolistic unions at preserving the jobs of their members, wouldn't it be fairer if workers had the option to join unions that emphasize long-term job security over higher compensation packages in the short run? Under the current system, union bosses have every incentive to pay themselves lavish compensation, even as they cannibalize the jobs of their rank and file.

If unions had to compete for members, surely there would be fewer scandals of union brass using union treasuries as personal piggy banks.

Another needed reform is to end the "union shop" principle. Americans need to be free to join or not join whatever organizations they choose. How can a person be considered free when he or she is either prohibited from joining or contributing to an organization that he or she admires or, conversely, compelled to join or contribute to an organization that he or she loathes? The right to join was protected when the Norris-LaGuardia Act of 1932 outlawed "yellow dog" contracts under which employers denied workers the right to join a union. The right not to join is violated by the Wagner Act of 1935 and the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, under which workers may be compelled to pay dues to a monopolistic union as a condition for having a job. Those acts should be amended.

In short, let's end union monopoly and forced-dues privileges, and let new unions emerge and compete to best serve their members' interests. If there had been open competition between

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unions over the past century, who knows what creative and effective nongovernmental solutions would have been found to address workers' concerns about pensions, health care, unemployment insurance, etc.?

Too many American workers have been denied the benefits of competition for far too long. Enough is enough. Let competition between labor unions begin today. Let the number of unions proliferate, and let workers choose to ally themselves with whatever unions best serve their needs.

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