

# Transformations of the American Labor Movement

**Editor's Note:** Labor unions have been an important element in the entire 20th century American experience. Their status has been highly dynamic, however. During the New Deal years, there was great growth in the number of unionized workers and in unions' political influence. Over the last quarter-century, in sharp contrast, unions have declined. We begin our coverage of change in the labor movement with an interview with Douglas Fraser, who has been a major figure in the US labor experience. Mr. Fraser was president of the UAW from 1977 to 1983. Then, *Public Perspective* reviews survey data on union members, on changes in the demography of the unionized workforce, on the views of the general public about labor unions and their role. Our coverage ends with another type of data on the changing environment for unions—a report by Marcela Miguel Berland and Susan Jessop of KRC Research and Consulting based on focus group studies with workers around the country.

## “I Don't Believe that You Can Have Democracy in the Workplace Without Unions”

*Interview with Douglas Fraser*

**Public Perspective:** How do you see the public's perception of unions changing over time?

**Douglas Fraser:** Public support of unions has clearly diminished. There are two main reasons for this. Labor represented the oppressed and was the underdog in the 30s and 40s. At the time we had tremendous support from academics and the intellectual community. Then as time went on, we were viewed by some as having gotten too powerful. Segments of the public believed—and I considered it economic nonsense—that the collective bargaining of unions on behalf of their members was a principal cause of inflation. I don't think any reputable economist would support that. We got inflation during the post-Vietnam era because the government wouldn't step up to its responsibility to increase taxes to pay for Vietnam. But unions got the blame. The other factor that came into play was in the 50s when the McClellan committee hearings were held. The public heard testimony—unrefutable, I think—that a small number of unions were corrupt, and some of the leadership was evil and immoral. The entire labor movement got painted with that same brush of tar.

Recently, a couple of polls have shown a bit of a comeback by labor. And a number

of economists have said that one key reason for stagnant wages in America is the weakening of unions. If that theory advances, you are going to see more support for the unions in the future than you have in the recent past. The other thing is that, frankly, because we only have 15.8% of the work force organized—maybe 11% of the private sector—we're becoming the underdogs again. Another thing that's changing, particularly in the AFL/CIO, is labor's inability to change. In the past, the unions were often inflexible and doctrinaire, and rejected new ideas. Today, leadership accepts the fact that change is necessary, and that if we don't develop the capacity and the courage it takes to change with times and events, history is going to pass us by.

**PP:** What changes do you see in the way union members view labor issues, and in how they feel about unions themselves?

**DF:** The members are smart enough to know when a company is in trouble and, therefore, that they have to lower their expectations in contract settlements. I have watched ratification votes, which really judge the acceptance of an agreement. The more difficult the economic times you are facing the higher the ratification vote—even when the agreement is not as good as some that were ratified by a lower percent-

age. That's a very sensible reaction on the part of the members. It really wasn't until the 80s that workers realized that their survival was dependent upon the company's survival, and their prosperity was based upon the company's prosperity. Now, there is a linkage that did not exist before, and a much more realistic one. That's why it's so important for companies to give the unions information. I don't know how the membership makes intelligent judgments unless they have the necessary information. I have great confidence in the members' ability to do the right thing if they have all the facts.

As to how unions are viewed now, this might be just nostalgia on the part of the older members, but they just don't think we have the strength that we had in the 30s—we don't have the unity and solidarity that we had. I am not quite sure that's the case, but that's the perception among the rank and file. I think that they believe that we have lost some of our clout and our effectiveness. They also read the stories that the percentage organized in the American workplace is diminishing. I can remember the days when *The New York Times* had a bureau chief in Detroit and *The Wall Street Journal* had labor reporters. They don't have them anymore. So the labor union doesn't get the attention it used to get. I and my predecessors used to appear on “Meet

the Press” and “Face the Nation”. I remember I did a couple of early “Donahue” Shows. I am not saying that anything terribly important was said. I am saying that when “Donahue” and “Meet the Press” recognize a union leader as being important enough to be on the show, that enhances the members’ image of their union.

**PP:** Does the change you’re describing mean that unions now have diminished political access as well?

**DF:** I don’t think so. The White House now is wide open to labor leaders. Union presidents meet rather frequently with the President, and George Stephanopoulos sort of follows up with the presidents in the labor movement. I go to the AFL/CIO Executive Council meetings, and I can’t remember one where both the Senate majority leader and the House speaker weren’t in attendance. The communication is as great now as it probably has ever been. Now, obviously, labor doesn’t have the clout with the majority of Congress that it used to. But in terms of the leadership, I think I can speak firsthand: The ties are still very close. Union leaders can talk to cabinet officers—they really have entrée.

Don’t think, by the way, that we really had much influence with Sam Rayburn when he was Speaker of the House, or with Lyndon Johnson when he was leader of the Senate. We just didn’t. I’ll bet they never attended any of the Council meetings as George Mitchell has in recent years. On the other hand, in 1984, every single Democratic presidential contender came before the Executive Council. I thought to myself: The labor movement is being bashed for being ineffective, and here are these very astute professional politicians coming to us and seeking an endorsement. At least in the eyes of the political people, the labor movement was seen as very important.

**PP:** What about labor and the Republican party?

**DF:** Well, there is a civil relationship with some of the people. First of all, in the Eisenhower years it was cordial. Even with Nixon it was reasonably cordial. Some of their secretaries of labor were outstanding. Jim Mitchell, labor secretary under Eisenhower, was a marvelous man. So was George Shultz, secretary under Nixon and Ford. The real change came in the Reagan years, when we were just shut out completely. We had no influence. There was very little contact between Lane Kirkland and the White House. (On the other hand, I know that Lane Kirkland spent about 45 minutes with Clinton alone after the NAFTA vote.)

If you look back at the labor movement, you see that there is a section that has always supported Republicans. The building trades usually wound up on the side of the Republican party. So did the Teamsters, starting with Nixon. They’re all now firmly in the Clinton camp. Reagan did it for us, really. Before, we had these desertions among several unions, but after the treatment Reagan gave us we had unity that we never had before in the labor movement.

**PP:** As you think of all of the rhetoric regarding what’s happening with labor, declines in membership, and so on, what’s missing from the discussion? What causes you to pause and say, “yeah but”...?

**DF:** One fundamental matter. It’s sort of philosophical. I don’t believe that you can have democracy in the workplace without unions. Workers have to have an independent voice, independent from the company. Also, in a democratic society it’s essential to have a strong labor movement because it is part of the system of checks and balances. If you look around the world, at the old

Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, in none of those countries was there a viable labor movement. Yet, in every single democratic country in the world, you find one.

Now, we have got to get on with the task of organizing workers. There are two reasons why we are not more successful than we are. First, the law is so constrictive that it makes it very difficult for unions to organize. More importantly, American employers are now resisting unions in a manner not seen in any other part of the democratic world. Only in America do you find labor consultants advising business on how to do this. It’s now a growth industry, and these are folks who advise companies on how to avoid unions or even destroy unions once they’re organized. Only in America does that happen. Take Nissan of Japan, for example. In Japan, labor unions were established, ironically, by Douglas MacArthur and the occupation government. Then Nissan comes to the US and locates a plant in Tennessee—and resists the union furiously! But they go to England and embrace the union there. Why? It is socially unacceptable in most democratic countries to resist unions in the fashion they are resisted here. BMW is building a plant in South Carolina and they are going to resist the union—they’ve made that announcement. This would be absolutely unheard of in Germany. Mercedes has made a decision to build a plant in Alabama and they have made the same statement.

The labor movement has to accept its share of the blame for its plight, but I am deeply concerned with the attitude of companies who are now resisting unions, with the laws which allow them to do so, and with workplace environments where workers really can’t make a free and uninhibited decision as to whether they want to belong to a union or not.