

GUEST EDITORIAL PREFACE

Special Section on Unions, Information Technology, and Knowledge Workers

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Unions across the globe have experienced significant decline in membership and power. In the United States, membership has fallen from about one-third of the workforce in the mid-1950s to just 11.3 percent in 2012. In the private sector workforce, unions claim only 6.6 percent as members. This decline has caused unions to explore new ways of reaching their members and employees more broadly to grow their ranks and increase a sense of solidarity. In this regard, information technology has emerged as a potential tool to facilitate such a reach.

Information technology, broadly defined, affects unions in two direct ways. First, the rapidly advancing array of technologies for instantaneous communications over vast distances and for the collection, transmission, and analysis of data may open new doors for unions to connect with members, employees, and the public generally to promote their mission. Some may point to the use of social media as mobilizing tool in the “Arab Spring” as indicative of the potential that modern technology has to advance social, political, and economic change. In this vein, information technology

can facilitate the formation and delivery of a persuasive message, communicate in real time about key developments and events, promote the efficient and effective conduct of internal organizational operations (i.e. back office functions), and provide needed information on important topics in a timely manner.

Second, the information technology revolution has spawned not only a vast new wave of jobs and occupations but also the transformation of existing work. The knowledge worker has replaced the industrial worker. With the vast growth in knowledge-based work combined with the shrinkage in the relative share of industrial and traditional trades work, unions must appeal to a new set of workers with different skills and interests if they are to succeed in increasing membership and density (i.e. the share of the labor force unionized).

Past research on unions and technology has suggested that (1) a rising number of unions have adopted new technologies to organize their operations and communicate with members and employees generally; (2) a growing share of the unionized workforce has become information-

technology literate; and (3) the use of information technology has created new opportunities for organizing employees for the purpose of union representation. However, unions have a long way to go, as the previously mentioned data about the extent of union membership suggest. Indeed, the overwhelming majority of information-based workers, as defined by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), are non-union. According to the BLS, only 9.7 percent of the more than 2.57 million information workers belong to unions. In other knowledge-based industries, such as financial activities and professional and business services, only 1.9 and 2.4 percent of the roughly 8.2 million and 12.7 million employees, respectively, are unionized.

Indeed, union scholars and observers disagree on the potential benefit of information technology on union organizing. Shostak (2002:248), for example, has concluded that “a new model of computer-based unionism... may help Labor finally achieve the security and well-being that has eluded it from pre-Colonial years to date.” Chaison (2002:256), however, warns that “union officers and staff are avid web enthusiasts with little if any appreciation of its potentially negative effects on the relations with members and revival.”

In this special section, we present two papers which address the issue of unions and information technology. The first paper [“The Face(book) of Unionism”] by Gibney, Zagenczyk, and Masters examines the current extent of usage of information technology by unionized workers vis-à-vis their non-union counterparts. It also examines the use of selected

social media (namely, Facebook and Twitter) by 25 major international/national unions. The second paper (“Distrust of Employers, Collectivism, and Union Efficacy”) by Fiorito and Gallagher examines the extent to which being a knowledge worker affects attitudes toward collective action and perceptions about the efficacy of unions. Their paper addresses the issue of whether the knowledge worker may be more or less predisposed to supporting a union.

We hope this special section furthers interest and research in the role that information technology may play in advancing social, political and economic change in general and unionization in particular. A key question to be answered is how unions can harness information technology to stimulate collectivism among workers generally and also among knowledge workers particularly.

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