

# Unions' efforts improve life for all U.S. workers

Charleston Gazette  
September 12, 2003  
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ANOTHER Labor Day weekend came and went. Like millions of Americans, I took part in several of its rituals. Few of them, however, had a lot to do with the purpose of the holiday. The annual tribute to the working class has largely become a kind of punctuation mark indicating the official end of summer.

There are some strong reasons for this trend. Many of us forget to honor the toiling masses because we've been too busy being part of them, even though fewer and fewer of us are to be found in mines or factories. To that extent, we're just glad for a long weekend. If we didn't have to work, that is.

Today's working class, defined as those who sell their mental and/or physical labor to survive, is very diverse. It includes high school dropouts and people with advanced degrees, retirees and people with disabilities, skilled technicians and people doing work activities to receive welfare benefits. Its members may work for private businesses, government entities or nonprofit groups, or they may be among the growing number of Americans who are unemployed and looking for work.

Those who are fortunate enough to still be employed are increasingly divided into two main camps: the overworked and the underemployed. The former may work 50 to 70 hours or more a week, often without overtime pay (a group that is likely to grow if the Bush administration gets its way on this issue). The latter try to make ends meet with one or several part-time, low wage jobs that don't offer benefits.

Both groups share economic insecurity and vulnerability to layoffs, downsizing, budget cuts and the flight of capital to those locations around the world that more closely approximate industrial serfdom.

Unfortunately, a declining proportion is represented by unions. This is a disturbing tendency and one that I hope will reverse itself in the future, for all our sakes. The wealthy in all times and places have been pretty good at taking care of themselves. (They're even better at getting working people to take care of them.) I must confess that I don't lose a lot of sleep worrying about them. But unions are the best thing working people have invented so far to take care of each other — even of workers who aren't members.

A recent study by the Economic Policy Institute titled "How Unions Help All Workers" shows the positive impact of the labor movement. Some of the findings aren't surprising. It has long been known that unions raise wages and benefits for members, but the details are pretty impressive. To be exact:

Unions raise wages by about 20 percent and total compensation (wages and other benefits) by 28 percent. Union workers are 18 to 28 percent more likely to have employer-provided health insurance and are 23 to 54 percent more likely to be in employer-provided pension plans. Union workers receive more generous health benefits than nonunion workers. They tend to pay lower deductibles and are more likely to be covered by their employers in retirement. Union workers receive better pension plans, with employers contributing 28 percent more to pensions. Union workers receive 26 percent more vacation time and 14 percent more total paid leave than other workers.

These are the kinds of benefits that promote real family values.

A more surprising finding of the study, however, shows that unions also benefit the unorganized and the larger society in several ways. For example, unions help to create a pay standard that employers follow. In industries with a strong union presence, nonunion employers “will frequently meet union standards or, at least, improve their compensation and labor practices beyond what they would have provided if there were no union presence.”

Beyond that, the study finds that “unions have set norms and established practices that become more generalized through the economy, thereby improving pay and working conditions for the entire workforce.” Benefits such as pensions and health insurance were first provided in unionized sectors and later spread more widely.

Union grievance procedures have often been mimicked (but seldom matched) by nonunion employers. Overall, the report found that “the union effect on the overall aggregate wage comes almost as much from the impact of unions on nonunion workers as on union workers.”

At a larger level, all workers and their families have benefited from labor laws and basic workplace protections that unions supported through political and direct action (many of which are now under attack). These include things like Social Security, the Fair Labor Standards Act, programs for poor families with children, family medical leave, occupational health and safety laws, unemployment insurance, and workers compensation.

By giving voice and power to those who would otherwise be isolated, the labor movement is a necessary ingredient to a thriving democracy. The report concludes on this note: “Unions not only improve workers’ benefits, they also contribute to due process and provide a democratic voice for workers at the workplace and in the larger society.”

Finally, they provide two items that are hard to put a price tag on: solidarity with others and basic self-respect. In the long run, things like that are even better than a long weekend.

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