

Tough Laws, Reduced Ranks—What Next For Unions?

Sharon Cohen, AP National Writer

From a sprawling United Auto Workers hall outside Detroit, John Zimmick has seen factories close and grown men cry when their jobs disappear. Through all the economic uncertainties of life in auto country, there has been one constant: the union.

In its nearly 80-year history, Zimmick's UAW Local 174 has been tested by bitter strikes, foreign competition and tenacious opponents. Now comes a new reason for anxiety.

On Thursday, Michigan's right-to-work law takes effect, a stunning shift in this symbolic capital of organized labor. The historic change is just the latest sign of turmoil in the union movement that has seen its nationwide membership shrink to its lowest levels since at least the 1930s — a paltry 6.6 percent in the private sector.

With 14.4 million members, unions still can be a potent political force at the ballot box. But protests in recent years over the passage of right-to-work laws in Michigan and Indiana, clashes over collective bargaining in Wisconsin and Ohio and a sharp drop in union elections across the US have raised larger questions: Where do unions go from here? How they do mend their battered image? Can they recruit new members? And is organized labor even a movement any longer?

Zimmick looks for answers in a union hall steeped in history. It's filled with photos, meeting minutes and other memorabilia belonging to Local 174's first president, Walter Reuther — even a phone used by the legendary leader who transformed the UAW into an economic and political powerhouse. Modern-day realities are far different: With layoffs and some 30 plants closing in the last five years, the local's ranks have dropped by more than a third, to about 5,000.

There could be even more losses with right-to-work, signed into law last December by Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder. Though employees won't have to make mandatory payments to unions that represent them in collective bargaining agreements, Zimmick isn't expecting the measure to have a major impact. "It's going to weaken us," he says, "but it's not going to kill us."

Still, Zimmick worries not just about his local — but the fate of all unions.

"It weighs on me every single night before I go to bed," he says. "Unions don't have the leverage and power that we used to. It doesn't mean we won't regain it. The unions, in my opinion, will come roaring back. ... But the image is terrible right now. The media spins us as hurting business and the non-union workers — there's

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animosity and jealousy toward us."

Unions still have influence in blue-state strongholds, but the days are long gone when labor leaders were household names and generous contracts were virtually assured. Even in friendly terrain, there are both die-hard supporters and workers who've abandoned the movement.

John Consentino paid his first union dues at 18, following his father on the Ford assembly line in Ohio; now 39 years later, he credits the UAW with lifelong security. When friends who don't belong to unions tell him they're doing OK, he says he warns them: "Wait until the hiccup, when things aren't going fine. You're going to wish you had a union."

Don McGough lost his job as a union steelworker. He found a new position and a decade later, he voted no when the machinists' union tried to organize workers at his company, JWF Industries, in Pennsylvania. "There are so many companies that just closed their doors because the union wouldn't budge," he says.

So, are unions to blame for their dwindling numbers? Yes and no, according to Gary Chaison, an industrial relations professor at Clark University in Massachusetts. He says unions haven't been nimble dealing with globalization and an increasingly mobile workforce.

"I think there still is a labor movement," he says, "but it's having a very difficult time finding its relevancy. It's not sure what to do or how best to serve its members. ... They're sort of wallowing around without direction. They still have a power in their presence. They don't have a power in their mission."

But unions, he says, have been buffeted by forces beyond their control: Improved productivity and technology have reduced the number of workers needed. Non-union employers have expanded in right-to-work-states. Companies have waged aggressive, successful campaigns to keep unions out. Plant closings make it almost impossible to replenish the number of union members lost.

Also, potential recruits are wary. "For most workers, joining a union is a risky deal and it has very little payback," Chaison says. "Most unions have not put their hearts and treasuries into organizing. It's so difficult and the payoff is minimal."

Zimmick knows firsthand. His local tried to organize workers at an auto supplier two years ago. The company, he says, responded by giving employees raises. "They said, 'Don't talk to those union guys. We're going to take care of you.'" The campaign didn't get to the vote stage.

The number of elections to certify unions has dropped dramatically. In fiscal year 2012, there were about 1,200 with more than 83,000 eligible voters, according to the National Labor Relations Board. In 1971, there were more than 7,500 with nearly 550,000 eligible voters.

The silver lining for union organizers: Approval rates have been near or above 60

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percent since 2006. In contrast, they were just half in 1990. In the heyday of unions in 1950, though, three of four workers voting wanted to sign on.

Union membership declined to 11.3 percent of the workforce last year from 11.8 percent in 2011, according to federal statistics. Especially notable was a loss in the private sector, even as the economy created 1.8 million jobs.

"I chuckle every time I hear the words Big Labor— 6.6 percent is not big," says Jefferson Cowie, a Cornell University labor historian, referring to the share of private-sector workers in unions.

And yet, unions still have considerable muscle, capable of raising tens of millions of dollars for political campaigns — largely for Democrats — and getting out the vote. Last fall, the AFL-CIO announced it had registered more than 450,000 new voters from union households in the previous 18 months.

The union vote was considered critical to President Barack Obama's victory in states such as Ohio.

While unions representing U.S. manufacturing might — auto and steel — have become smaller, the emphasis in recruiting new members has shifted to the service sector.

The Service Employees International Union, which represents nurses and lower-wage service employees including janitors, security, hospital, home health and child care workers, has doubled in size since 1996, to 2.1 million workers. It says it has added 50,000 workers annually in the last decade.

The union recently organized about 3,000 security officers in Philadelphia commercial office buildings, hospitals and universities, winning a three-year contract that provides salary increases, health care for full-time workers and sick days.

Kevin Upshaw, a 46-year-old Army veteran and security officer at the University of Pennsylvania, says the contract will eventually boost his hourly wage from about \$13 to about \$15. Just as importantly, he says it'll also reduce medical expenses for his asthmatic wife, which have cost them about \$11,000 over the past three years. "That's taking a big load off our shoulders," he says.

"The union gives us a lot more stability," Upshaw says. "It's making this job a career and it's taking us out of poverty."

Upshaw says he had some doubts at first about unions, but the more he heard, the more he liked. "Some people think they're only out to take our money," he says. "But like anything in life, you've got to pay for any service that's provided."

Gabe Morgan, president of the SEIU Pennsylvania State Council, says the yearlong campaign succeeded because it wasn't directed at a single company and workers had a common purpose.

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"You have folks who live in the same neighborhoods, who may or may not know each other, doing the same job at different places," he says. "That kind of gives each other the strength to persevere. ... Ironically, it also made the employers more comfortable. It was easier for them to agree to something when they know their competitor was doing the same thing. No one was individually at risk."

Morgan also says the union label still is appealing in working-class communities where organized labor already has a foothold.

"If you're a low-wage worker living on the north side of Philadelphia or the West Side of Chicago, the only person who owns a house or has a lawn mower ... the only person making a decent living is someone with a union job," he says.

Though some unions have been forced to make concessions to save jobs in recent years, wages still can be very attractive.

Michael Bronson, who's starting an apprenticeship next month at Ironworkers Local 55 in northwest Ohio, expects to someday nearly triple the salary he's earned as an auto mechanic.

"For 10 years, I thought it was as good as it was going to get," says the 28-year-old Bronson. "I was just settling for whatever was offered. I was making \$11 an hour and I had no health benefits. That was my future. ... You're expendable. They can pick up another guy at \$8.50 and fire you."

Bronson began looking for a union job after noticing his in-laws — including a pipefitter — didn't share his financial pressures. "I knew they didn't live like I did, paycheck to paycheck, wondering what's going to happen next month," he says. "That's what persuaded me."

When he completes a four-year apprenticeship, Bronson expects an hourly wage of about \$30. "Middle class to me is heaven," he says. "I've been \$10,000 below poverty the last 10 years."

Six months ago, Bronson knew nothing about unions. Now he's a convert.

"It's kind of like a religion," he says. "Once you realize what a good union can do for you, you'll live it the rest of your life and you'll push it on everybody."

That attitude isn't universally shared. Approval of unions hovered around 60 percent through 2008, but it's now 52 percent, according to a 2012 Gallup poll. There's great political disparity: The favorability rate among Democrats is 74 percent; among Republicans, it's 31 percent.

Gallup also found slightly more than half those surveyed predict unions will become weaker, with only about one in five thinking they'll be stronger in the future.

Nowadays, fewer people have family roots in organized labor, and that colors the

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perception of unions. "The image goes back and forth between non-existent and the boogeyman," says Cowie, the Cornell historian.

The image in recent years has been shaped by skirmishes in the public arena, where union membership is nearly 36 percent. Massive protests in two industrial Midwest states in 2011 ended with opposite results.

In Ohio, voters overwhelmingly rejected a sweeping law that placed restrictions on public employee unions — a huge victory for labor. But in Wisconsin, the GOP-controlled Legislature approved Gov. Scott Walker's proposal that effectively ended collective bargaining for most public workers — a move that sparked an unsuccessful gubernatorial recall.

The Wisconsin law may have long-term ramifications. The number of unionized public workers there fell by about 48,000 in 2012 — about a quarter of the total, according to an analysis by Barry Hirsch, a labor economist at Georgia State University.

That suggests the incentive for being in one of those unions is now much weaker, Hirsch says, but it's too early to tell if that will be a trend.

Meanwhile, organized labor is fighting to extend its reach in the private sector, including in the South, generally hostile turf for unions.

The UAW has lost two bids to organize workers at the Nissan Motor Co. auto plant in Smyrna, Tenn. The union is now trying to get the Japanese automaker to allow it in the plant to make its case to workers in Canton, Miss.

Black ministers, college students, the NAACP and political leaders, with an assist from actor Danny Glover, have formed an alliance, staging press conferences, holding rallies and making TV appearances, casting the campaign as a civil rights battle.

Everlyn Cage, a Nissan worker, wants UAW representation. "A union," she says, "would help us have a voice at the plant. It would help us sit down and negotiate our safety."

Cage says Nissan has used "fear tactics," including roundtables with company officials suggesting the plant will close if workers unionize. Similar complaints have come from some Smyrna workers. Many colleagues, she says, tell her they'd support a union "but they don't want to come out publicly. They say, 'We have families and children and we need our jobs.'"

Nissan says accusations of intimidation are "simply false." It also notes the company didn't lay off any U.S. workers during the recession when demand dropped and workers shifted to non-production jobs without getting pay cuts.

Kimberly Ragsdale, a Nissan worker in Canton, says her job helped finance two of her kids' college educations — something that would have been impossible in her

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previous \$10-an-hour position driving a forklift.

She thinks unions are pointless. "Why," she asks, "would you pay somebody to talk for you when you have the freedom to voice your own opinion?"

Her message for union supporters: "If they're not satisfied with Nissan, they should leave and leave us alone. If it was that bad here, why have you been here all these years?"

It's no surprise the UAW faces an uphill battle in red-state Mississippi, where unions represent a small fraction of workers.

But last fall in Pennsylvania, workers at JWF Industries, a metal manufacturer for the defense, oil and gas industries in Johnstown, voted 194-38 against joining the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers.

Bill Polacek, company CEO and son of a union steelworker, appealed to his workers, saying he could point in every direction to unionized companies that were vacant or torn down. "If the union can promise you job security, why are all these companies not here anymore?" he says he told them. "A union can't promise you anything. All they can do is promise you union dues."

Still, he insists he's not anti-union.

"I think they have a purpose," he says. "There are companies that don't treat their employees right." But in his case, he adds:, "If the union had come in, it would have been a failure on my part. I wouldn't have been doing the right thing."

Don McGough, an 11-year veteran at JWF, rejected the machinists' bid. A former member of the steelworkers union, he lost his job at a machine shop when staff was cut after a 15-week strike.

That experience, he says, taught him a lesson about union leaders and negotiators. "They're worried about themselves," he says. "They're not worried about us. ... You're really putting your future in the hands of people you don't really know, compared to here. I know the owner really well and trust him."

In Michigan, Zimmick, the UAW man, says if unions don't like their leaders, they can vote them out. He says he knows his members and they aren't happy when he has to deliver painful messages about concessions or higher health care costs, but are pretty accepting.

Now the union faces new pressures with right-to-work, but he says it's a temporary setback. He expects the law will be a major issue in the state's 2014 elections — and his side will rebound.

"Unions will come back," he says. "I don't know when, but they will. They're here for a reason."

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