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Gordon L. Clark

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PART I

Economy and community

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I

Crisis of organized labor

In an era predicted by some to be the mature, growth-consolidation phase of industrial unionism (Lester 1958), the United States labor movement is fighting for its survival. Industrial labor unions, the traditional centers of union power in the economy and in the labor movement, are particularly threatened. Some of these unions have lost as much as 40 percent of their membership base over the last decade. Not only have they suffered from economic restructuring, but these unions are winning proportionally fewer and fewer representation elections, contesting fewer elections, and winning only in smaller and smaller electoral units. Internally and externally industrial unions are under siege.

One startling aspect of recent patterns of union decline is that the survival of industrial unions is under threat even in their home domain: northern industrial towns and cities. Diversification strategies like the United Auto Workers' southern strategy have become practically impossible to affect. Declining membership is the norm, and growth of membership a distant memory. In contrast, over the past decade service workers' unions seem to have been able to extend their representation of American workers, though even this trend has slowed in recent years. With structural changes in the economy, large-scale displacement of industrial employment, and a relatively poor performance of industrial unions in representation elections, the flow of members to the American labor movement has slowed to barely a trickle.

These patterns require explanation. Likewise, our inherited intellectual frameworks designed for understanding the patterns and complexities of the American labor movement require revision. It is clear that standard frameworks are inadequate. This much has been recognized in numerous reviews of the academic literature, wherein commentators complain that dominant models of unionization have failed to comprehend the complexity of processes and the diversity of patterns of American unionization. Sometimes it is suggested that their failure is a product of ad hoc theorizing (a point made by Fiorito and Greer 1982); other times it is suggested that their failure is methodological and empirical (see Hirsch and Addison's 1986 extended review). I hope to help in the intellectual reconstruction process,

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particularly with regard to raising the significance of the geographical dimensions of American unionism.

This chapter has two interlocking components. One is a description of the patterns of declining American unionism. Here, the focus is upon the stocks and flows of unionization – union membership and union success rates in representation elections by industry, union, and region. The second is an argument for a geographical perspective on American unionism; in terms of understanding the decline of organized labor, and understanding location decision making.

Declining unionism in America

That the US labor movement is fighting for its survival has been recognized by many commentators. The AFL–CIO’s Committee on the Future of Work (1985) responded by proposing alternatives to traditional union policies, emphasizing how changes in the structure of work are likely to bring into being new forms of unions and union objectives. Academics sympathetic to the objectives of the labor movement but otherwise doubtful of unions’ ability to fashion and implement new policies have become involved in publicly defending and advancing unions as desirable economic agents in advancing labor productivity and competitiveness (see Freeman 1985, and Freeman and Medoff 1984). Still, compared to other advanced industrial countries, the American labor movement is a shell of its past. While unions in other countries, especially the United Kingdom, France, and West Germany, are also under some pressure from conservative governments, the American labor movement is faced with extinction.¹

Recognition of the crisis of declining levels of unionization, let alone development of policies to deal with the crisis, has been a source of considerable debate amongst union leaders. There appears to be no consensus for a single cause of this crisis, within the union movement and/or amongst academic commentators. Some would blame the Reagan administration for the most recent downturn in rates of unionization. Coincident with, or because of the Reagan administration, there was a precipitous decline in union strength during the 1980s. In just over eight years, unions’ share of the work force dropped from about 25 percent in 1978 to 21.9 percent in 1982, to about 17.5 percent in 1986 (table 1.1). All indications are that there has been a further drop in unions’ share of employment in the last couple of years.²

Weiler (1983, 1984a,b) identified supposed anti-union attitudes of Reagan-appointed members of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), delays in the representation election process, and an adjudication process

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Table 1.1. *US union membership, for selected years 1953–86*

Year	Total (000)	Percent (empl.)
1953	16,310	32.5
1960	15,516	28.6
1970	20,990	29.6
1974	22,165	28.3
1978	21,757	25.1
1982	19,571	21.9
1986	16,975	17.5

Sources: Troy and Sheflin (1985, table 3.41, pp. 3–10) and unpublished data from the US Department of Labor (Washington DC)

quite unable to deal with the explosion of management unfair labor practices, as vital reasons for unions' most recent decline. By some accounts, the Reagan NLRB has sought to strip unions of their traditional contract privileges, and limit their discretion in management decisions, leading one labor law scholar to suggest that the current Board is the most anti-labor Board on record (Murphy 1987). These issues have prompted renewed calls for federal labor law reform and reform of the NLRB, its procedures, and the right-to-work (RTW) option provided to states by the Taft–Hartley amendments of 1947. Other commentators are less concerned about possible biases of adjudication, and contend that poor performance in representation elections is due to unions' incompetence. This is Getman's (1986) opinion, informed by a detailed case study of a union's internal organization of the organizing process at Yale University.

There is general agreement that unions' poor performance in representation elections is a vital part of any explanation of the overall patterns of decline. But more often than not, studies of unions' electoral performance have failed to consider the role of localities in understanding aggregate patterns of decline. There is also general agreement that regulation of local labor–management relations by the NLRB has something to do with these trends. But, few would agree with Goldfield (1987) that anti-union sentiment within regulatory agencies like the NLRB and the courts is the essential basis for understanding the crisis of organized labor. In fact, for all the rhetoric there are very few studies of the interaction between regulative environment(s) – NLRB, RTW, and local – and union success rates in representation elections.

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Another kind of explanation of union decline centers upon the changing structure of the US economy (see Dickens and Leonard 1985). In historically highly unionized industrial sectors like autos, chemicals, rubber, and steel there are literally fewer jobs than ten years ago. Deindustrialization has taken its toll of workers and communities, and the once dominant industry-concentrated unions like the United Auto Workers and the United Steelworkers of America. Manufacturing has for many years been steadily declining in relative significance as an employer. Recently, though, this process seems to have accelerated as manufacturing has not only lost relative position but absolute numbers of employment. According to Farber (1987), economic crises in traditional industries have meant fewer union jobs and, perhaps just as importantly, less loyalty (as indicated by declining union success rates in representation elections) of workers to their unions.³

By this logic, the changing structure of the US economy has drastically affected the stock of available union jobs, and has also reduced the flow of new members to these unions. Implied by this argument is a certain geographical fixity of the process of declining unionism. To the extent that deindustrialization is spatially concentrated as measured by employment losses and the like, declining unionization is also spatially concentrated. But as I argue in chapters 3 and 4, the fragility of union support could be interpreted as the product of corporate (re)location strategies designed to fragment and avoid unions. In this interpretation, not only has the home domain of organized labor been affected by economic restructuring and its attendant job losses, but corporations may have designed geographical restructuring programs as deliberate anti-union strategies.

At this point, I am not about to adjudicate between explanations of declining unionization – explicating their relative significance is, after all, an objective of the book. The decline of organized labor is a very complicated issue, made so by the economic and geographical diversity of the US economy. However, it should be immediately obvious from the discussion here that I favor an explanation of declining unionism which integrates issues of national and local economic restructuring with the regulation of labor–management relations, and the process of local representation elections. Their precise relationships with one another will, of course, vary in particular instances.

Labor relations and location

Location is a vital element in understanding union performance and the anti-union strategies of corporations. At an obvious level, the connection between location and labor relations was created by the structure of federal

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and state labor relations laws. But at a deeper level, the connection is strategic in the sense that unions and employers use this inherited geography in their bargaining with one another as their behavior is structured by the geography of labor relations. For the reader to appreciate the significance of this argument it is important to understand the background to these issues, especially the rudiments of location theory.

Weber's (1929) industrial location theory, developed with reference to Von Thunen's (1964) original masterpiece on land rent, integrated labor costs with transportation costs to generate maps of industrial production.⁴ Most industrial location theories give labor costs a central role in allocating production across the landscape, especially neoclassical economic theories.⁵ Labor costs were defined by Weber as those costs of production directly attributed to "the expenditures of human labor" (Weber 1929:95). While he accepted that labor was not a commodity like other production inputs, he nevertheless suggested that in economic terms, "the energies expended in labor . . . are in a capitalistic economy of today the wages and salaries which are paid out per unit of product" (95). Weber's economic landscape was formed through the techniques of marginal economic analysis, and with reference to the inherited economic system (capitalism).

Weber apparently aimed to go beyond abstract theory. He claimed to have a "realistic" theory (12) of the "location of industries" (1) (see Gregory 1981, p. 536 for an interpretation of the "realistic" roots of Weber's theory). But, at the same time, he aimed to provide a "pure" theory of location. In particular, he analyzed the rules of location relevant to labor costs, transportation costs, and agglomeration economies. He excluded reference to "any differences of political organization and to the influence of trade and tariff policies; and . . . to differences of race, climate, and environment" (13). While he considered these issues relevant to the organization of the international economy, to the extent that they were also important within nations he would also have excluded them from consideration.

Like Von Thunen, who used a featureless isolated state, Weber sought to develop his theory within a featureless institutional and physical environment. This does not mean that he thought these issues unimportant: quite the contrary. He argued that his pure theory of industrial location was just a first step; a general theory would necessarily introduce these issues afterwards.

Since publication of *Theory of the location of industries*, location theorists have been preoccupied with Weber's first step. This has meant a very narrow conception of the location problem, a limited repertoire of analytical techniques, a limited definition of labor costs, and the exclusion of some of the most important factors (like institutional regulations) affecting

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the location of economic activities within and between nations. Essentially, few steps have been made to account for the issues which Weber thought so crucial, but which he deliberately left out of his pure theory of industrial location. It is little wonder that conventional location theory has so few adherents nowadays, despite attempts to generalize Weber's original theory (Smith 1981). Weber's expansive conception of the industrial location problem has not been taken seriously enough.

Still, there have been some recent developments in location theory which might be interpreted in the spirit of Weber's expansive conception of the location problem. Here, I refer to the growing literature on the structure of local social relations of production, their role in firms' location decisions, and their implications for the reproduction of spatial economic differentiation. Of course, the underlying rationale of this literature is quite different from Weber's pure theory of industrial location. Instead of using standard neoclassical theoretical tools, the analytical logic is premised upon a commitment to historical materialism. The cost of labor is broadly interpreted, including reference to issues like the flexibility of local work practices with respect to technological innovation, and the allocation of the social wage between capital, the local community, and the state.

For example, Richard Walker (1985) argued that technological change and regional growth and decline is mediated, indeed sustained, through local employment relations. To the extent that regions are dominated by different forms of employment relations there will be consequent differences in the pace, type, and nature of technological change. It is apparent that the institutional environment of production is the crucial factor in allocating capital between places.⁶ In an empirical analysis of this proposition, Clark, Gertler, and Whiteman (1986, ch. 3), differences in state-level regulations regarding workers' rights of union representation and open-shop employment were argued to be fundamentally important in understanding the locational imperatives of firms' investment decisions, and the consequent map of economic growth and decline.

Similarly, Warde (1985) and Cooke (1985), following Massey's (1984) lead, argued that differences in local work practices provide multi-locational firms with opportunities to dominate certain geographical labor markets, and thereby escape entrapment by sections of organized labor who would otherwise constrain firms' abilities to accumulate capital. Johnston's (1986) paper on the role of the National Labor Relations Board in regulating relocation decisions has shown that the institutional structure of local labor relations can have a deciding role in firms' location decisions. In Johnston's example, the right of a firm to relocate production during the course of a contract was interpreted by the NLRB in terms of a legal relationship

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between capital and labor. The fact that the local social relations of production are regulated by government and interpreted by the courts emphasizes the important role of institutions in structuring the map(s) of production.

There are, of course, a variety of approaches used by those writing on this theme. Generally, though, it is assumed that understanding the structure of local labor relations is a necessary step if a more general, and historically realistic, theory of location is to be developed. As Scott (1985:479) suggested, “the characteristics of social life and reproduction in the spatial context are decisively structured by the division of labor . . . [and] the forms of social life and reproduction that emerge at specific places feed back upon locational processes and the organization of production.” Instead of labor costs being interpreted narrowly as simply wages and salaries, the whole ensemble of local class relations is the object of inquiry. In this sense, the literature on the spatial division of labor is premised upon the political and environmental factors so quickly excluded by Weber from his theory of location.⁷

In this setting, the geography of unionization is very important for a couple of reasons. Not only does it go to the heart of current problems faced by the union movement, but it also has a crucial role to play in the strategies and behavior of corporations with respect to unions. Not only is the overall national level of unionization important, but so too is the spatial differentiation of unionization. In the remaining sections of this chapter these dimensions are described over space and time.

Patterns of unionization

In the early 1950s, unions' share of national nonagricultural employment peaked at about 39.0 percent. Since then the level of national unionization has significantly declined. From 1954 to 1980, unions' share of working men and women fell from 39.2 percent to 23.6 percent (Dickens and Leonard 1985). Periodically, unionization levels have stabilized, even slightly increased (table 1.1). Through most of the 1960s and 1970s, unionization was around 28.0 percent, with slight ups (1960, 1970, 1978) and downs (1974, 1982) associated with macroeconomic conditions. Kokkelenberg and Sockell (1985) contend that unionization was relatively constant over the period 1973 to 1981. At the most general level, the evidence seems to support their claims, although it appears that there was a steady erosion of union support beginning in the late 1970s. However, since 1980, there appears to have been a precipitous decline in unionization.

At one time, the major industrial unions were the national leaders. Indeed, in the early 1950s, the Steelworkers Union was the nation's largest

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*Economy and community*Table 1.2. *Membership (000) and affiliation of the ten largest US unions, 1983*

Union (affl.)	Membership
Teamsters (AFL–CIO)	1,523
National Education Assn. (Ind.)	1,444
Food and Commercial Wks. (AFL–CIO)	993
AFSCME (AFL–CIO)	959
United Auto Workers (AFL–CIO)	904
IBEW (AFL–CIO)	820
United Steelworkers (AFL–CIO)	707
Carpenters (AFL–CIO)	609
Service Employees Union (AFL–CIO)	589
Communication Workers (AFL–CIO)	573

Source: Gifford (1986, appendix A), and Troy and Sheffin (1985, table 3.33, pp. 3–6)

union, with over one million members. By 1983 (table 1.2), however, it was at the lower end of the top ten unions. Twenty-five years ago, the top ten list would have been dominated by other unions like the Machinists Union. Now, the service unions are much more important. Current membership patterns by union are indicative of more general trends of employment growth in non-manufacturing industries, and the recent economic and manufacturing crisis which stripped many of the industrial unions of a third or more of their members.

As Table 1.2 indicates, in 1983 American unionization was spread between a variety of sectors. Beginning with the Teamsters Union, an independent diversified union with strong representation in the transportation industry,⁸ the next three unions were professional (National Education Association), service oriented (Food and Commercial Workers Union), and white-collar oriented (AFSCME, a union representing state and local government employees). Then, the UAW (United Auto Workers) and the IBEW (International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers) followed – two quite different unions, the former industrial production-oriented, the latter craft-oriented with strong representation in a range of industries and firms including electrical and construction. The Steelworkers Union ranked about seventh, a more diversified union with proportionally more members from the clerical and service sectors. After these three industrial unions came another service workers' union (Service Employees Union), and the Communication Workers, who are closely related to the telecommunications sector, and especially AT&T.

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Table 1.3. *Percent of US unionized employment by region, and share of national unionized employment by region, 1975 and 1982*

Region	1975		1982	
	% union	% share	% union	% share
New England	24.3	5.1	18.6	5.2
Middle Atlantic	37.5	23.5	29.8	22.6
East North Central	36.0	24.6	21.0	22.6
West North Central	25.8	6.9	21.1	7.2
South Atlantic	17.2	9.3	12.8	9.6
East South Central	21.6	4.2	17.0	4.3
West South Central	17.3	5.5	12.8	6.4
Mountain	23.5	3.6	16.5	3.9
Pacific	35.7	16.7	26.7	17.7
Territories	19.4	0.6	13.1	0.5
United States	28.9	100.0	21.9	100.0

Source: Troy and Sheffin (1985, tables 7.12 and 7.14, pp. 7–13, 7–15)

American unions have had quite variable rates of success in penetrating local labor markets. Indeed, whatever the national unionization trends over the post-Second World War period, the regional patterns have been far more diverse. Table 1.3 reports unionization rates by census regions for two years, 1975 and 1982 (the latest available data). Three patterns should be immediately discernible in this table. First, national levels of American unionization were very dependent upon rates of unionization in just three regions. This was apparent for 1975, and more recently in 1982. These three regions were the Middle Atlantic, East North Central, and Pacific regions, contributing in sum 64.8 (1975) and 62.9 (1982) percent to total national unionization. Second, these same three regions had the highest rates of unionization in both years, but also had the largest declines in unionization levels between 1975 and 1982. For example the Middle Atlantic region lost nearly 8.0 percentage points during this period, while the East North Central region lost about 15.

Third, other regions had generally lower rates of unionization, especially the three southern regions of the South Atlantic and the East and West South Central. This was true for both years, although their rates of unionization did not decline as precipitously from 1975 to 1982 as was the case in the three most important regions. Their contribution to national unionization was consequently quite low, even if their relative contribution to overall unionization slightly increased over the period 1975 to 1982 (from 19.0 to 20.3 percent). Comparatively, the New England region was highly