

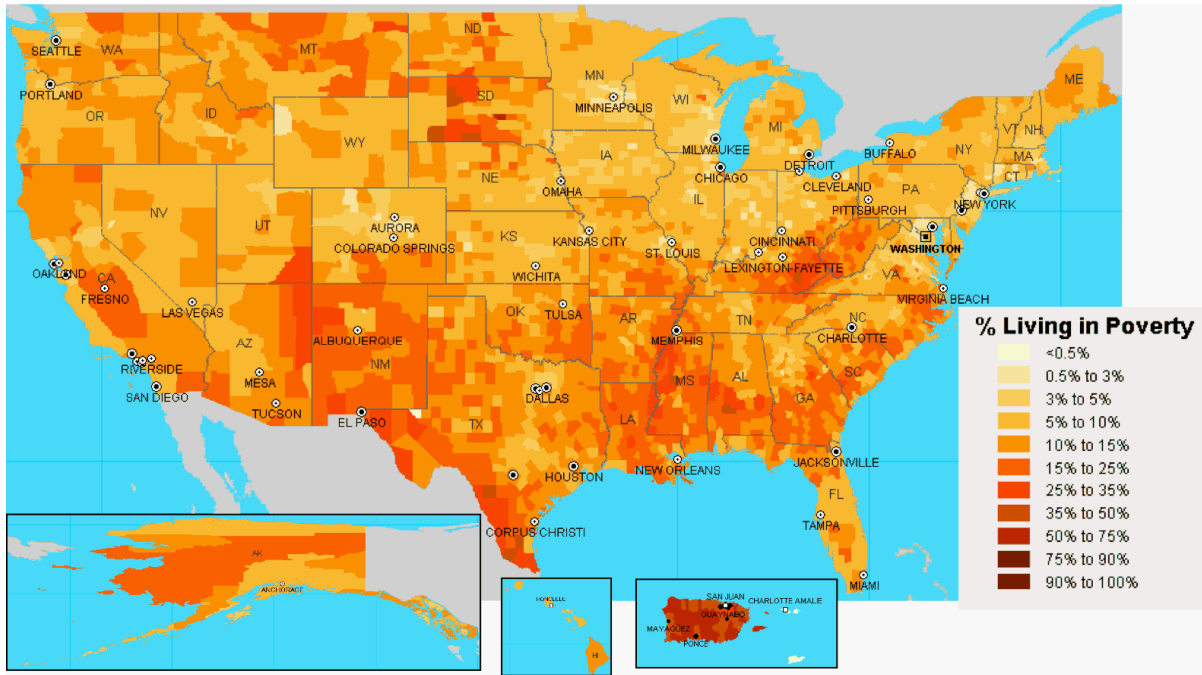
Sawtown Report V5 N2 - Do We Need Unions?

I was asked if an employer provided everything that a union provides would we still need unions?

The first obvious answer is if an employer provided everything that the union does then one would not need unions. But on further reflection it is clear that even if an employer matched the union wage scale, benefits, and working conditions there are still three reasons why unions would still be needed.

The economic reason is that until every employer matched union scale and benefits, then unions would still be needed to provide an upwards push for non union employers. Even with as little as 13% of the work force unionized, employers who want the best workers in any occupation where the union has members must at least match the union scale. Every percentage drop in the density of union membership in any given labor market means that all workers have less bargaining power. If millionaire athletes still need a union than it seems like Joe Lunchbucket will need one too. The poverty map on this page not only shows where poverty is in the US it also shows what happens when unions are absent. The most poverty exists in those states where union density is lowest.

The second reason is social. Non union workplaces have not been able to copy those aspects of the union movement that provide for dignity and respect on the job. Even in the best non union workplaces, workers still complain about management not listening and the boss just not getting it. The reason the boss doesn't get it is because when it's all said and done, in a non union workplace the boss has power and the worker doesn't.



How is this power used or abused? First, the wealth produced by workers is never given to them completely. Some portion of what we all produce is skimmed off to pay for the owner, his house, his tee time and green fees, his vacation, and his car. What does the owner provide in return that could not be provided by a bank loan at 4% interest? Yet, nowadays the owners are skimming off upwards of 20% in profits that are not put back into the business. In other words, even the best boss (of which there are extremely few) still seeks to always take more from the worker than the worker creates.

If what they take isn't money then they use their power, to take away our voice, and ultimately our dignity. A worker is not a child, yet in a non union workplace, the boss has the same authority as a parent. For children incapable of making decisions having parents is essential. For workers who can make decisions having a union to give them the power to make their voice heard is equally essential.

Just look at management to see what happens when workers don't have the protection and power of a union. How often have you seen the boss agree with his/her boss even though they don't really agree? This "YES" boss logic has resulted in millions of poor management decisions. Decisions that have cost workers, their families and their communities thousands of jobs and an endless list of social disruptions.

Why do managers agree with their boss more than they should? The answer is simple because without a union they have no power. You can be fired at will for no reason. There is an old saying that power tends to corrupt and absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely. In a non union work place there is absolute power by the boss over your future and your pay check. The result is favoritism, discrimination, and moral corruption. Even if the boss strives not to abuse their power their interests are never identical to yours?

The third reason is political. Without unions who would advocate for a higher minimum wage, shorter work days, safer work, better health care, family leave, and all the other non economic benefits that government forces on companies? Workplace accidents are still too high in the US imagine what they would be without unions pressuring the government to pass and enforce safety laws. Social justice results from unions demanding that all workers be treated with dignity and respect. It occurs when the gap between the richest and the poorest is smaller and creates all types of corruption when unions are weaker. It is no accident that the current economic crisis started in the industrialized country where unions are weakest. Strong unions mean that wealth is more equitably distributed and that government punishes those who break the rules and assist those who are most in need.

Today the US ranks 30th in the world in terms of life expectancy, 22nd in annual average hours worked, 80th in income equality, 24th in children in poverty, and 19th in student performance which dropped 6 spots in just 3 years. So much for us being the greatest in the world. When we had union density above 25% we were in the top ten of every one of these categories.

Today in the US we tend to think about the corporation and what is in its best interest and seem to have forgotten that the measure of success of any economy isn't how large profits are, but

rather how it benefits a majority of its participants . An economy that only works for the few won't work for anyone for long.

Strong unions are required for a strong democracy, a just society, and decent work. Once wealth and power are concentrated among a few the system changes from one-person one-vote to one-dollar one-vote. At that point the system is no longer democratic.