

Obits for Labor Unions Are Premature

By Tom Juravich
and Kate Bronfenbrenner

THE PRESS RECENTLY declared the end of the labor movement. It reported on a major new study by Harvard economist Richard Freeman and Joel Rogers of the University of Wisconsin, suggesting that American work-



Tom Juravich is associate professor and research director in the Labor Relations and Research Center at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Kate Bronfenbrenner is director of labor education research at the New York State School for Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University.

ers would prefer cooperative relationships with management to traditional labor unions.

Coupled with union membership at less than 16 percent of the work force and a new wave of far-from-pro-labor Republicans marching into Washington, many see this as definitive proof of labor's obsolescence. A more careful analysis, however, reveals that this is far from the truth.

Workers are fired in one of every four union elections for pursuing their legal right to organize. Given that background, it should be no surprise that many no longer see unions as a practical means for achieving a voice in the workplace. No wonder the study found that workers grasp at any management-offered opportunity to contribute that doesn't involve a fight or threat to their job.

Yet, it is a leap of faith to assume that this increased interest in cooperation is of the same order that trade unionism was for workers a generation ago — and a genuine replacement for it.

What Freeman and Rogers have identified is not a new social movement about to burst forth on the scene. Instead, they have captured the quiet mass

resignation of American workers to a system that robs them of any hope for real power on the job.

When the United Auto Workers or the United Mine Workers were born, they represented something very fundamental for workers and their families. They were a path out of poverty, out of the sweatshop.

Talk to workers in working-class bars, shopping malls or city offices today. There is no mass movement out there for the latest labor-management scheme. There are no rallies, no demonstrations, no passion for these programs — except maybe among the consultants.

If one had polled workers in the 1920s, the findings would have been very similar. Workers' organizations had been rendered powerless by the law. With few other options, many participated in the company unions that were the equivalent of today's employee-involvement programs.

Yet, just as today, these employee-representation plans did not embody the hopes and dreams of workers and their families. And as soon as the so-

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cial and political climate changed in the 1930s, the Congress of Industrial Organizations burst forth with a level of mass organization unheard of among American workers.

Although we must be cautious in predicting some mass uprising of American workers in the near future, we must also be careful not to write off the labor movement in this country.

Ironically, while Freeman and Rogers fail to note its significance, they found that close to half of American workers, despite the odds, still continue to believe in unions and the possibility of real power in the workplace.

We cannot ignore the 2,000 textile workers at Tultex Corp. in North Carolina, several thousand health-care workers at Providence Hospital or tens of thousands of janitors in Los Angeles.

In the last few years these workers put their livelihoods and, in some cases, their lives on the line to organize a union and win. Nor can we ignore that the labor movement actually grew last year — in both total union members and percentage of the work force — for the first time in a decade.

Unlike Freeman and Rogers, we should also not ignore the hundreds of thousands of public-sector workers who have flocked to existing unions in the last decade. Whether city bus drivers, food-service workers in school cafeterias, or professional planners in city offices, they have been enthusiastically winning almost 90 percent of their elections.

This is not because these public workers are fun-

damentally different from the private sector workers Freeman and Rogers surveyed. But, because public employers rarely offer strong opposition to union campaigns, these workers are free to express their genuine desire for organizations that provide them with a real voice.

Furthermore, when one looks closely at what the study says workers want from cooperative programs — such as the right to elect representatives, have access to company information and have disputes settled by outside arbitrators — these programs start to look more and more like unions. In fact, historically, these are conditions that have only truly existed in a union environment. So, although workers may be smart enough not to say the "U" word, they still want unions.

For without unions, which means without independence or power, these cooperative programs are hollow attempts to pacify workers' desire for a real voice on the job. The result is that these efforts rarely rise much above free doughnuts and happy talk. Freeman and Rogers may have found that workers prefer these weak organizations to more powerful unions. What they fail to acknowledge is that this does not come from a lack of desire for real power, but is a product of the fear of employer retaliation.

Despite what the pollsters may report, and management may hope, trade unions will continue to exist in this country. For, no matter how embattled or how unfashionable, they remain the only vehicle for real power on the job for working Americans.