**Iron Mines to Iron Bars**

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It was recently reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics of the US Department of Labor that, in 2009, the union membership rate—the percent of wage and salary workers who were members of a union—was 12.3 percent, essentially unchanged from 12.4 percent a year earlier,

However, the number of wage and salary workers belonging to unions declined by 771,000 to 15.3 million, largely reflecting the overall drop in employment due to the crisis. In 1983, the first year for which comparable union data are available, the union membership rate was 20.1 percent, and there were 17.7 million union workers. Nothing so surprising so far! A combination of employer assaults on unions and a deep-seated conviction on the part of many workers that unions seldom represented anything other than the interests of those who run them had all but inevitably contributed to a steady erosion in the ranks of union members.

Of perhaps greater interest was the finding that, for the first time, more public sector employees (7.9 million) belonged to a union than did private sector employees (7.4 million), despite there being five times more wage and salary workers in the private sector. As a result, the union membership rate for public sector workers (37.4%) was much higher than the rate for private industry workers (7.2%). Workers in education, training, and library occupations had the highest unionization rate at 38.1 percent. Close behind were protective service workers at 35.6%. Protective service workers include police, jail and prison guards.

In this essay, I’d like to explore some of the consequences of the long-term decline in union membership and the significant shift in membership towards public sector workers. First off, I’d like to highlight the trend in enrollments in postsecondary institutions over the course of the last forty years. According to the Digest of Education Statistics, total enrollments in postsecondary degree granting institutions (including both public and private, community colleges, baccalaureate colleges and graduate schools) were as follows:

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Year | Total Enrollments | Increase from Decade Earlier | Percent Increase from Decade Earlier |
| 1970 | 8,531,000 |  |  |
| 1980 | 12,097,000 | 3,516,000 | 41% |
| 1990 | 13,819,000 | 1,722,000 | 14% |
| 2000 | 15,312,000 | 1,493,000 | 11% |
| 2010 | 18,613,000 | 3,301,000 | 22% |

All told, the increase over the forty year period amounted to over ten million individuals or 117%. Much of this extraordinary growth was fueled by the federal government’s financial aid policies—including Pell Grants and subsidized student loans. Interestingly enough, the Pell Grant program has now become a major source of revenue for the fast-growing proprietary sector. Those colleges enroll about 6% of all college students but account for 20% of all Pell grant awards. They currently are fifteen of the twenty institutions receiving the most federal funds through the grant program. In 2008-2009, the University of Phoenix received $658.9 million. But this essay is not about the need to reform the Pell Grant program.

What is most remarkable is that the continued growth in enrollment has occurred in spite of the fact that many individuals who enroll in college, especially community colleges, never earn a college degree. At the City University of New York (CUNY), just about 50% of students enrolled in baccalaureate programs earn a degree in six years but less than 30% do so at the associate degree level. These figures don’t differ significantly from the national picture. Only about 52 percent of college students complete a degree, and very few do so within four years.

So why do people keep enrolling? I suggest that it is not unrelated to what has accompanied the long-term decline in union membership over the past several decades—de-industrialization and casualization—meaning the increased number of workers who are employed part-time, perhaps haphazardly, and all but certainly without security or benefits. In the face of the steady disappearance of collective means for the defense and/or advance of workers’ interests, lots of individual workers found themselves with little alternative to trying to make the best of things for themselves by attending school and hoping to earn a credential that would perhaps give them what they couldn’t find—a job that might be worth it.

But they’re not finding it in college either. Two authors have recently described the world of community college students—Mark Bosquet, in *How the University Works: Higher Education in the Low-Wage Nation*, concludes that most community college students are already workers and that the jobs they have make it all but impossible for them to be reasonably successful at being students—he has an especially harrowing description of students employed by UPS in Louisville. Rebecca Cox, in *The College Fear Factor*, describes how students are haunted by a desperate hope that they’ll be able to find something better through completing a degree. But, their desperation drives all too many of them to poor choices about which programs to enroll in and how to become successful students. For the most part, unlike membership in a union (even a rotten, lousy one), education is seen as an individual strategy. When it doesn’t work, the responsibility for failure or defeat is the individual’s—“I didn’t study enough; I picked the wrong major; I guess I’m not cut out for school. Maybe I deserve to be where I’m stuck.” To make matters worse, many unions (especially those in the health care fields) have increasingly encouraged their members to seek advancement and improvements in wages through participation in education and training programs. Front and center of this trend has been Local 1199 of SEIU, the health care workers union in New York City. Ariel Ducey, in *Never Good Enough: Health Care Workers and the False Promise of Job Training*, has captured the outcomes—little advancement, few improvements in wages and lots of bitterness among frustrated workers. But the bitterness is all too often accompanied by resignation—especially in a self-proclaimed and endlessly promoted “progressive” union like 1199.

Let’s turn now to the significance of the trend towards higher unionization rates in the public sector. This growth has not been the result of a higher level of militance or strike activity. Indeed, there are numerous restrictions on the right of public sector workers to strike. In New York State, the Taylor Law, approved after the 1966 transit workers’ strike in NYC, imposes fines on unions and jail-time for union leaders if workers strike. Federal workers are not even allowed to be in unions that advocate strikes--Reagan had no trouble in firing the PATCO air controllers. As a result, public sector unions are heavily dependent on cultivating the good will and friendship of various political leaders—thus, they invest heavily in political campaigns and in lobbying on both sides of the two party aisle. Recently, a veteran United Federation of Teachers (UFT—the union that represents public school teachers in New York City) member and union staffer wrote an essay arguing for political realism in the current round of collective bargaining between the union and the city. To do so, he recalled the aftermath of a teacher strike in 1968:

In November of 1968, after a brutal forty day strike teachers stumbled back to school, the dailies, the liberal intelligentsia flayed teachers and their union and the impact of the strike resonates forty years later. To make matters worse, the contract was ending, it looked as if another war was brewing with Mayor John Lindsay. A year later with the negotiations concluded the mayor and the union stood arm in arm as Governor Rockefeller signed Tier I into law, a change in the pension that was so dramatic as to boggle the mind. As they walked out of the Governor’s Office the author of the plan Dave Wittes, the UFT Secretary, leaned over and whispered to my wife, “They have no idea what they have done…” ….Why did a mayor who had done everything in his power to destroy the union agree to such a rich benefit? It was simple, just plain old politics. John Lindsay wanted to be President and he needed Al Shanker and his teachers.

He neglected to mention what the strike had been about. Put simply, it was an effort by the union to defeat efforts by the city’s black communities to achieve community control of the schools after numerous earlier efforts at school integration had failed in the face of white opposition. The strike ended with a series of compromises—to the ultimate and profound disadvantage of the students attending schools in black communities. (See Jerold Podair’s *The Strike That Changed New York*). But, as the staffer noted, it did wonders for the UFT. Indeed, the book by Podair could have been titled *The Strike That Made the Union*.

In the years after 1968, several legislative acts had reduced the rich benefits gained in 1968 for teachers who joined the system afterwards—specifically by raising the retirement age. In 2005, the same author quoted above was advising UFT members looking to restore a lower retirement age:

The NYS Constitution guarantees that pension benefits for public employees may not be reduced. The legislature can create new Tiers of the pension system for future employees. Pension improvements, however, require the cooperation of the Mayor and the support of the State legislature and the Governor. Members who rail against our support of Republicans as well as Democrats are shortsighted. One party does not pass legislation. If we can take advantage of a political climate to create significant pension improvements we should seize the moment.

It took the UFT until 2008 to secure the victory it wanted but they did get it.

I don’t want to pick on the UFT but there’s another recent example of the ways in which public sector unions, especially the larger ones with substantial dues revenues, can use the regular political system to their advantage (specifically for the increase of their dues revenues). While George Pataki was Governor of New York, the state legislature passed a bill to allow individuals who provided child care services in their homes to be represented by a union. Pataki vetoed it but when he was replaced by Eliot Spitzer, the same allowance was approved through an Executive Order. In October of 2007, a representation election was held and more than 8,000 of these home providers voted to be represented by the UFT. As a result, the UFT secured the rights to represent and collect dues from 28,000 providers in NYC. The Civil Service Employees Association (CSEA) got to do the same for another 26,000 individuals elsewhere in the state. Then, in 2009, the UFT and CSEA negotiated their first contracts with the New York State Office of Children and Family Services for the newly organized child care providers. So, to recap, the unions persuaded legislators and a friendly governor to approve the right of the providers to be represented; then, the same unions won the right to represent those workers and finally negotiated a contract with a state agency. And lest it be forgotten, underneath all this is simple politics—money, votes and re-elections. Although the details may vary across the country, I suggest that the pattern represented in these stories goes a long way towards explaining why there are now more union members in the public sector.

But it doesn’t stop there. In another recent development, the current governor of new York, David Patterson announced plans to close the Moriah Shock Incarceration Correctional Facility near Mineville in the Adirondacks Mountains as part of his strategy to close the state’s budget gap. The facility, which is a special facility designed to shock inmates out of their criminal inclinations through a kind of intensive basic training, is located upon the abandoned site of a Republic Steel iron-ore mine. Currently, there are just over a hundred staff members and fewer than 200 inmates. The people who work at Moriah are represented by the Public Employees Federation (PEF), which has thrown itself full force into a campaign to save the jobs. Their argument is straightforward enough: “Moriah Shock Incarceration Correctional Facility is a community,” said Richard Sheffer, a PEF staffer, at a community rally. He went on: “Moriah embraced the facility, as it did the mines, to provide employment for the surrounding area.” From iron mines to iron bars!

Which brings us to the last of the trends of the last few decades—the trend towards incredibly high rates of imprisonment and entanglement with the various parts of the criminal justice system. Look at this graph!

[](http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/glance/tables/corr2tab.cfm)[**[D]**](http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/glance/d_corr2.cfm)

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics Correctional Surveys

All told, seven million adults are caught up in this nightmare. And the union movement in upstate New York just wants its small share and the jobs that go along with it. They want to be “unionized: protective service workers. I wonder how many of the inmates and how many of the correctional staff have ever been members of a union not in the public sector and how many have dropped out of community college. But, similar experiences aside, it does matter which side of the bars you’re on.

This is part of the state of affairs of working class struggle, or lack thereof, in the United States in 2010.