

What do you think of unions?

by Van D. Keating

I'd guess that most readers would answer that question with "not very much" based on their experiences with public school employee unions. However, even in a much broader context, most people do not view unions in the same light today as they did 10, 30 or even 70 years ago. Unions have undeniably made a significant impact on American history and, at one point, became a significant and powerful force to deal with. But where do they stand today? Gallup recently released its 2009 installment of its annual "Work and Education" survey on unions and the results are interesting, if not surprising.

First and foremost, Gallup found that organized labor has taken significant image hits during the past year. While 66% of Americans continue to believe unions are beneficial to their own members, a majority now say that unions actually hurt our economy. More generally, fewer than half of those surveyed (48%), an all-time low approve of labor unions, down from 59% a year ago. This is the first time the approval rating has dropped below 50% since Gallup first asked the question in the 1930s. The previous low was 55%, found in both 1979 and 1981.

Public reaction to labor unions is one of the longest-running trends the Gallup Poll has followed. Gallup first asked "Do you approve or disapprove of labor unions?" in 1936, a year after Congress passed the National Labor Relations Act. That first poll found 72% of Americans approving of unions and only 20% disapproving. While approval of unions has declined over the last year among most major demographic and political groups, the biggest drop has been among political independents.

Organized labor was put in the spotlight in December, as Congress enacted a major bailout package for the ailing U.S. auto industry. Gallup polling at that time found a substantial segment of Americans blamed the auto unions for the industry's problems, although more blamed auto executives.

Gallup's records show increases in the belief that unions have a negative effect on companies where workers are organized, and on the economy generally. The percentage believing unions mostly hurt the companies where workers are organized has risen from 39% in 2006 to 46% in 2009. As a result, Americans are now more evenly divided over whether unions mostly help or hurt these companies, whereas in previous measures the balance of opinion was positive.

There has been an even larger jump in the percentage saying labor unions mostly hurt the U.S. economy, from 36% in 2006 to 51 % today. This is also the first time since 1997 that more have said unions hurt rather than help the economy. Americans' general concerns about the current state of the economy could certainly be a factor in these negative views of unions, in addition to specific perceptions about unions.

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Negotiations

(2 DVD set)

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Part 2 Insurance Benefits: What is VSBIT? Health Insurance, Dental Insurance, Disability & Life Insurance, Additional Resources

Part 3 Negotiation Laws: Negotiation Laws, Mandatory Subjects of Bargaining, Agency Service Fees, Good Faith Bargaining, Impasse Procedures, Strikes & "Finality", Regional Bargaining, Legal Assistance,

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Most continue to believe unions are beneficial to their members; 66% in the 2009 poll say unions mostly help unionized workers, while 28% say unions mostly hurt them. However, this is a slightly less positive assessment than Gallup found in the previous measure in 2006, and is the lowest in 10 years.

The poll's mainly negative findings of unions involves unions' impact on nonunion workers. More than six in 10 Americans, up from about half in 2006, say unions mostly hurt nonunion workers.

So, if unions are perceived as beneficial to their members and harmful to nonmembers, does this mean Americans would like unions' reach to be expanded or cut back?

The answer in this year's survey is relatively negative: 42% say they want unions to have less influence in the United States, compared with 25% favoring more influence. In 2008, these figures were about even. However, factoring in the 28% who want unions to maintain their current influence results in a combined 53% backing the current power of unions - still the largest opinion segment.

Perceptions of unions' prospects for the future are slightly more negative. With the United States' manufacturing base in conspicuous decline and the auto industry's troubles headline news, 48% in the poll predict that labor unions in the country will become weaker, which is a 7% increase from a year ago.

Admittedly this year's Gallup update on views toward unions comes in the middle of an economic recession and in the aftermath of major economic interventions by the president on behalf of two of the three largest domestic auto companies. The poll also addresses unions in general, not specifically the public sector or school unions.

However, I believe there are several aspects of the survey that ring true, regardless of the sector or industry.

The author is the director of management services for the Ohio School Boards Association, and this article is reprinted with permission from the OSBA newsletter.