Union Membership Attrition

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In studies of the state of the labor unions, researchers often estimate *union membership attrition*—that is, the annual loss in union members caused by employment shifts. For unions to have net growth in the number of members, the losses must be offset by new union members, which are gotten through organizing.[1] This research summary examines the validity of common assumptions about membership attrition by measuring union membership changes in expanding and declining industries as well as the number of new members needed by the unions each year for either no change or an increase in union density of 1 percentage point. Union density, a widely used measure of union organization and influence, is calculated as the annual percentage of employed wage and salary workers who are union members.[2]

Union membership change in growing and declining industries

A 1999 study by the AFL-CIO revealed that union membership was concentrated in declining industries and there were few new members in expanding industries. Over a 14-year period (1984–97), union members held 80 percent of the jobs lost in major declining industries, but gained only 5 percent of the new jobs in the fastest growing industries.

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In other words, where jobs were lost on net they were disproportionately union members' jobs, and where jobs were gained they were disproportionately nonunion jobs. Employment shifts were not adding to the unions' membership rolls, but rather decreasing them significantly.[3]

This relationship is examined with updated union membership data derived from the Current Population Survey (CPS), in which respondents were asked if they belonged to or were represented by unions or employee associations.[4] The industries used in the calculations here were selected from the CPS data on the basis of their rankings over time adding or losing jobs. Table 1, therefore, shows union membership changes in the 10 industry classifications that had the greatest employment increases over a recent 5-year period: 2003 to 2008.[5] Table 2 shows changes in membership in the 10 industry classifications that were declining the most during those years.

In the 10 industries with the greatest employment growth, 19 percent of new jobs were held by union members.[6] Among the industry classifications with the greatest decline, 24 percent of the jobs lost belonged to union members. These results are certainly not as dramatic as those uncovered by the AFL-CIO study, but they do enable us to conclude that union members held a larger proportion of jobs in the fastest declining industries than in the fastest growing industries. Consequently, as some industries expand over time and others contract, union membership declines.[7]

Unchanged and minimally changing private sector union density

Analyses of union membership growth or decline usually estimate the number of new members that unions would have to gain for private sector union density to remain unchanged from one year to another. This is done to illustrate how unions must "run fast" to simply remain in place—that is, how many new members unions need to acquire through organizing efforts to offset the outflow of members. For example, Richard B. Freeman calculated the annual loss in private union membership and concluded that "unions, like the Red Queen in *Through the Looking Glass* for whom 'it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place,' must organize large numbers of workers each year to maintain private sector density."[8]

This report also estimates the number of union members needed to increase private sector union density by a minimal amount—a single percentage point. This represents a very low rate of growth and can be used to show how many new members unions would need each year to reverse the decline in density by just a small, seemingly unremarkable proportion. This is a benchmark that has been utilized before. For example, Marick C. Masters estimated that for unions to have no change in density in 1995, they would have to gain 315,000 members; but if they wanted to raise density by just 1 percentage point, they would have to add more than a million new members.[9] In 2004, Freeman concluded that in order "to balance off the loss of members due to the normal birth and death of firms and changes in employment in union and nonunion workplaces and maintain their 9-percent share of the private sector workforce in 2001, unions must add about 500,000 new members annually. To add a single percentage point to density,

Table 1.	Change in union membership for the 10 industry classifications with the greatest increases in employment, 2003–08		
(CIC[1]) Industry classification	Change in employment	Change in union membership	Percent of new jobs held by union members
(7860) Elementary and secondary schools	940,849	367,204	39.0
(8680) Restaurants and other food services	709,133	44,304	6.0
(8180) Other health care services..	662,301	61,508	9.0
(8190) Hospitals	579,454	158,058	27.0
(7380) Computer systems design and related services..............	367,029	4,736	1.0
(8370) Individual and family services..	348,888	−2,230	–
(9470) Justice, public order and safety activities	347,914	153,603	44.0
(7290) Architectural, engineering, and related services.............	326,352	5,206	2.0
(490) Support activities for mining	253,997	5,790	2.0
(7870) College and universities, including junior colleges..........	238,246	98,271	41.0
Total	4,774,163	896,450	19.0

[1] Census Industry Code (CIC) is used in the Current Population Survey.
NOTE: Dash indicates not applicable; union membership increased as employment decreased.

SOURCE: Union membership and coverage database, Current Population Survey, Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Table 2.	Change in union membership for the 10 industry classifications with the greatest decrease in employment, 2003–08		
(CIC[1]) Industry classification	Change in employment	Change in union membership	Percent of lost jobs held by union members
(6680) Wired telecommunications carriers....................................	−191,817	−56,864	30.0
(3570) Motor vehicles and motor vehicle equipment manufacturing...	−171,066	−138,653	81.0
(6890) Non-depository credit and related activities	−170,710	−6,492	4.0
(1990) Printing and related support activities............................	−129,885	−1,341	1.0
(2370) Plastics product manufacturing..	−129,627	−12,578	10.0
(7970) Offices of physicians...	−129,323	3,244	–
(1680) Cut and sew apparel manufacturing................................	−97,859	−13,097	13.0
(4170) Professional and commercial equipment and supplies, merchant wholesalers....................................	−86,065	2,963	–
(6070) Air transportation..	−81,750	−55,132	67.0
(8270) Nursing care facilities..	−80,371	−25,956	32.0
Total	−1,268,473	−303,906	24.0

[1] Census Industry Code (CIC) is used in the Current Population Survey.
NOTE: Dash indicates not applicable; union membership increased as employment decreased.

SOURCE: Union membership and coverage database, Current Population Survey, Bureau of Labor Statistics.

unions must add close to 1 million new members."[10]

Table 3 shows the annual membership increases that would be necessary for union density to remain unchanged and increase by 1 percentage point. The number of members needed for no change in union density varies widely, ranging from gains of 885,000 in 2000 to a loss of 160,000 in 2008. In other words, in 2008 (as well as in 2007), membership can de-

cline and density could have remain unchanged, primarily because of the decline of the labor force, the dominator in the union density equation. An increase in union density of just 1 percentage point, however, requires significant increases in union membership (ranging from 921,000 new members in 2008 to 1,509,000 in 2006). In 9 of the 10 years, unions had to gain more than 1 million new members to increase union density by

a single percentage point.

Conclusion

The results of this analysis indicate the following: First, jobs in major declining industries are more often held by union members than jobs in expanding industries. Second, in the private sector, unions must organize large numbers of new members to increase union density by a single percentage

Table 3.	Union membership, union density and employment, private sector, 1998–2008				
Year	Employment (in thousands)	Union membership (in thousands)	Union density	Membership change needed for density to be unchanged from previous year (in thousands)	Membership change needed for density to increase 1 percentage point from previous year (in thousands)
1998	98,329	9,306	9.5	–	–
1999	100,025	9,419	9.4	83	1,083
2000	101,801	9,418	9.0	885	1,170
2001	101,605	9,113	9.0	31	1,048
2002	100,581	8,651	8.6	400	1,406
2003	102,648	8,452	8.2	376	1,402
2004	103,584	8,205	7.9	289	1,325
2005	105,508	8,255	7.8	80	1,135
2006	107,846	7,981	7.4	431	1,509
2007	108,714	8,114	7.5	–69	1,018
2008	108,072	8,265	7.6	–160	921
Source: Current Population Survey, Bureau of Labor Statistics.					

point. Unchanged union density is much more easily accomplished and sometimes can occur without membership gains. The review of two dimensions of union membership attrition suggests both the continuing loss of members as employment shifts and the magnitude of membership growth necessary to outpace attrition. □

Notes

[1] Gary N. Chaison and Joseph B. Rose, "The Macrodeterminants of Unions Growth and Decline," in George Strauss, Daniel G. Gallagher, and Jack Fiorito, eds., *The State of the Unions* (Madison, WI, Industrial Relations Research Association, 1991), pp. 3–45.

[2] Gary N. Chaison and Joseph B. Rose, "Linking Union Density and Union Effectiveness," *Industrial Relations*, January 1996, pp. 78–105.

[3] Steven Greenhouse, "Union Leaders See Grim News in Labor Study," *New York Times*, Oct. 13, 1999, A23. This report, which was overseen by David Chu, the AFL-CIO's director of strategic research, was not published, but its findings were reported in the press.

[4] The Current Population Survey (CPS), a monthly sample survey of about 60,000 households that collects demographic and labor force status information on the civilian population of the United States, is one of the primary sources of information on the labor force. The CPS is conducted by the Census Bureau for the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

[5] This period was selected because the industry classification system used for the CPS was revised in 2003; some industry content changed and some new industries (for example, newspaper publishing, services to buildings and dwellings) were introduced.

[6] Note that two of the fastest growing industries are dominated by public employees and, compared with the private sector, had a higher union density rate (for example, in 2008, union density was 7.6 percent in the private sector and 36.8 percent in the public sector; see *Union Members in 2008*, USDL 09–0095 (U.S. Department of Labor), January 28, 2009. If the two industries are excluded—elementary and secondary schools; and justice, public order and safety activities—only 11 percent of the newly created jobs are held by union members, which is less than half the rate (24 percent) of the union job losses in declining industries. Even with the exclusion of only these two categories, conservative estimates result, because some other large industry sectors, such as colleges and universities, and hospitals, have a substantial public employee presence.

[7] It is true that unions gained more members in the 10 industries with the greatest growth than they lost in the 10 industries with the greatest declines in employment (+896,450 and –303,906, respectively); however, unions had a net loss in private employment of 187,000 members from 2003 to 2008, as shown in table 3, which suggests that membership losses in *all* declining industries exceeded membership gains in *all* expanding industries. During that period, private union membership density fell from 8.2 percent to 7.6 percent.

[8] Richard B. Freeman, "Contraction and Expansion: The Divergence of Private Sector and Public Sector Unionism in the United States," *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Spring 1988, pp. 63–88; see p. 73.

[9] Marick C. Masters, Unions at the Crossroads: *Strategic Membership, Financial, and Political Perspectives* (Wastport, CT, Quorum, 1997), p. 45.

[10] Richard B. Freeman, "The Road to Union Renaissance in the United States," in Phanindra V. Wunnava, ed., *The Changing Role of Unions: New Forms of Representation.* (Armonk, N.Y., M.E. Sharp, 2004), pp. 3–4.