

The Glorious Future that American Unions Walked Away From

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Unions in America have been in a decline for over 60 years. Union membership has dropped from almost 35% of all workers in 1945 to less than 15% today. In fact, union membership has declined to almost exactly the same percentage as it was in 1930 before FDR took power and encouraged the growth of unions. The first crucial battle the unions lost came after FDR died, when over Truman's veto the Taft-Hartly Act was passed in 1947. Truman called the Taft-Hartly Act a "[slave labor bill](#)".

Since then unions have lost critical battle after battle; the mainline old unions centered around industrial concerns like GM and Ford have shrunk to a tiny fraction of their former self; and despite the efforts of the SEIU unions and others, new economy workers mostly have not been organized.

The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), created by the Wagner Act in 1935 as independent agency of United States Governments holds the official mandate to conduct elections for labor union representation and to investigate and remedy unfair labor practices. Under the Bush administration, the NLRB has:

- made it [impossible for large numbers of workers to join unions](#)(pdf);
- [potentially reclassified many workers as supervisors \(including many nurses\)](#) in order to remove them from unions;
- [passed numerous rulings which treat employers in one way, and unions in another.](#)

Unions have spent the last 7 years under assault by the Bush NLRB.

The union movement, it is fair to say, is in many respects in its weakest position in over 60 years.

Another 4 or 8 years of a Republican presidency could doom American unions, pushing them below 10% and subjecting them to more and more hostile NLRB rulings, which will cripple what ability they have to organize. Even a moderate Democratic president who halts the slide at the NLRB but doesn't reverse it will leave unions in a shaky situation.

Unions, even more than the US itself, need a new FDR. Without FDR unions would have never had their day and since FDR unions have been in a long steady decline. It's been nothing but downhill, whether under Republicans or Democrats, and absent a President who really cares about unions there's no reason to believe that decline will stop.

Unions were in, 1930, in almost the same shape they are now. Bad economic times, combined with the right president, turned it around for them and for America and made the times good again. But it took the right President as well--[British unionization, for example, increased in the Great Depression, but kept increasing till the late 70s\(pdf\)](#).

What government took away, fertile conditions for organizing and pro-union policies, government can give back. And since much of what matters is determined by the Labor Relations Board and the president has a great deal of say over its makeup, the most important factor for the fate of unions (absent a repeal of Taft-Hartley) is who the President is.

With the right President, and the right NLRB, the union movement can have it's renaissance, it's 11th hour resurrection. Without it, unions may dwindle into the long, long night. And that wouldn't just be a tragedy for union members: because of how unions raise the boats of all workers, the decline of unions would be a tragedy for America.

All of the Republican candidates would be awful for labor, and differ only by the degrees of the horror they would unleash.

Amongst the Democratic candidates it's safe to say that Hilary Clinton, who has as her main advisor a union buster and whose husband did very little for unions, would be a largely status quo President. Her board would be decent, she'd be bad but not awful on trade, and she wouldn't sink a lot of personal capital into union issues.

As with many things with Obama, it's hard to determine how good or bad he'd be, but one has to have their doubts about a Democratic candidate who argued that union advertisements in Iowa were unacceptable, and who acted as if union money were the equivalent of corporate money. Certainly there are those who see unions and corporation as little different--but they aren't friends of unions.

John Edwards has spent the last four years working with unions, walking their picket lines and making their cause his. He's clearly the most pro-union of the three remaining candidates; his primary issue is economic justice and he believes that corporations have too much power. His campaign, from the very beginning, was predicated on union support.

But unions didn't reciprocate.

Lists of major union endorsements make this clear. [AFL-CIO unions predominantly endorsed Clinton](#), and in fact [more major unions endorsed Clinton than anyone else](#), with Edwards coming in second in the endorsement stakes. Most recently Nevada's largest union, [the culinary union endorsed Obama](#) and is working hard for him in that key swing state.

Now let's imagine a world in which labor had taken a strong stand and endorsed the candidate who was most pro-labor, John Edwards. Edwards came in second in Iowa, behind Obama by 8%. It is hard to believe that if unions had come in, say 4 months ago, and used their ground machine (still, even today, probably the best organizing machine in the Democratic party) that they couldn't have swung the election 8 points.

What could unions have accomplished for their own cause?--Edwards' victory in Iowa and the standard surge in the polls that comes from winning Iowa. More importantly, Edwards would have suddenly been the story coming out of Iowa and would have had a ton of media coverage. In general, as people learn more about Edwards they like him more and more.

On to New Hampshire. Who knows if Edwards would have won there with union support, as it was a very fickle primary. But let's assume not.

Next state: Nevada, where John Edwards is currently polling third, but [again within 6 percent of the leader](#), Barack Obama, and only 3% behind Clinton. Nevada is a huge union state, with early organizing from union allies plus the boost from winning Iowa it is impossible to imagine that Edwards would not now be blowing out the polls in Nevada.

At that point, with Nevada, Edwards would have won two of the three initial states. It is hard to imagine that his national numbers wouldn't be much, much higher than they are now. It might be a two way race, it might be a three way race, but no matter what he'd be in contention, and maybe even a favorite.

And here's the thing--neither Clinton nor Obama, should they win now, will feel a massive debt to Labor. The endorsements were useful and appreciated, and they helped. But they weren't desperately needed. The payback will be a slightly better NLRB, but not enough to save American labor.

But an Edwards presidency would owe everything to the unions, and John Edwards would know it. And he would have campaigned with an explicitly pro-union campaign--

if he won the nomination, and later the presidency (don't forget [his electability numbers are far better than Clinton's and as good or better than Obama's](#)), he would come into power with a pro-union public mandate.

Neither Clinton (experience) nor Obama (non-partisan change) will come into office with a mandate to help unions.

I can only assume that labor read too many polls and made too many political calculations. Unsure of who would win they went with the "inevitable" candidate (Clinton) instead of the one who had spent 4 years working for and with them. And as a result, if Obama or Clinton win, Unions are going to get a Democratic president who appreciates their help (just like Bill Clinton did) but who isn't really willing to go all out for them (just like Bill Clinton didn't).

The irony here is that if labor had taken a strong stand and put their own best interests first instead of triangulating and currying political favor, the strongest pro-labor candidate would be in the lead today.

Unions would have had a good chance to elect a massively pro-union president--who would have owed them his presidency.

Imagine that alternate world.

Now instead, imagine what four more years without solid support for all American workers and radical reform at the NLRB will mean for you, your pocketbook, and your family.

Decisions like these are what has made the American union movement what it is today.

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