**Ep 74 - Unions**

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***[Virginia Prescott] David Zonderman is professor at North Carolina State University who has written exclusively on the American labor movement. David welcome to Civics 101!***

[David Zonderman] Thanks for having me.

***[VP] We're going to start with the basics. What is a union?***

[DZ] A union is when a group of workers usually in well, it can be in one workplace or in a number of different ones, come together and say we would like to bargain together. The official term is collectively bargain with our boss or bosses for a legally binding contract that will cover things like our wages, our benefits, our hours, whether we have some kind of seniority rights on the job, grievance procedures, workplace safety.

***[VP] What are some examples of unions?***

[DZ] Some of the classic unions, particularly the 20th century big unions, were the United Auto Workers and the United Steelworkers. In the late 20th century, we had the Farm Workers Union. Today we have some of our biggest are what's called SEIU the Service Employees International Union CWA the Communication Workers of America. Those are some of our big unions today.

***[VP] There is the Department of Labor in the United States Federal Cabinet… Are union and labor Interchangeable terms?***

[DZ] No. In fact the vast majority of American workers are not in unions today. Today about between 11 and 12 percent of all American workers are in unions in the private sector is down to about 8 percent which is a level that's as low as it's been since the 1920s. And the public sector the rate is about 30 percent and that varies dramatically from state to state. So most labor most working people are not in unions.

***[VP] I'd love to ask you more about the history. But first so say a group of workers they want better working conditions they want to form a union. How does that happen? Are there legal requirements? Local, state, federal?***

[DZ] Yes. All of the above. And it's a fairly complex process. The basics are if you want to try to form a union: First of all you have to know whether you have the right to form a union and to collectively bargain. For example in my state, North Carolina, public employees – that includes school teachers, university professor,s people at work on road crews – we don't have the right to have a collectively bargain contract because the federal law excludes state employees. Each state sets its own rules. Now say you're working in a factory. You're at a New Hampshire Public Radio. So say you're working in a factory in New Hampshire or are working in a hospital or an office. Usually if you're in the private sector you have the right to try to form a union. And what you do is you ask a federal agency called the National Labor Relations Board, the NLRB, to help you with an election and they will supervise an election and they determine who in your company is eligible to vote. It may not be all the workers it may be only workers in a particular building or who do a particular kind of job. The fancy word for that is the bargaining unit so they decide OK you've got a company of five hundred people. 400 are in a bargaining unit. So those 400 people have a vote. And if a majority who turn up that day, say 300 to 400 show up, 200 vote for the union 100 vote against it, you have a union. If 200 vote against it and only 100 voting for it you don't have a union.

***[VP] How does being in a union benefit workers?***

[DZ] Well I think potentially unions can offer many benefits for workers. We have very good economic data across the country that shows that most unionized workers will get paid higher wages for a similar job that a non-union worker does a unionized worker is much more likely to have company provided health care benefits pension benefits things of that sort. Union workers have often have grievance procedures. They often have things like workplace safety committees. So there's a lot of potential benefits for workers. Now obviously higher wages mean higher costs for a business. So businesses are often reluctant to try to bring a union into their plant or office or ever.

***[VP] You mentioned collective bargaining. I'd love to know a little bit more about other terms that come up in the civic and political sphere especially that affect labor. Like right to work for example.***

[DZ] Sure. Right to work law says that you can go to work at a company or an office or a factory whatever that union contract and the union has the duty it's called the duty of fair representation. They have to represent you if you're covered by the contract. But if you're in a Right to Work state you don't have to pay union dues. So you get all the benefits of a union contract and don't have to pay any money to the union to help bargain the contract and make sure the contracts enforced fairly. So it creates what union folk call free rider problems.

***[VP] So people who benefit from what unions do without paying union years.***

[DZ] That's correct. And of course it's done to try to make unions less attractive to try to make a state less attractive to a union, for a union to say we're not going to try to organize in that state because it's a right to work state. Today most right to work states tend to be in the South, the Midwest. Although recently some of the most strong union states places like Wisconsin and Michigan home of the United Auto Workers have actually become right to work states so organized labor has become weakened all over the country.

***[VP] How did the unions become a political force in our public life and politics.***

[DZ] Unions started getting involved with politics probably as early as the end of the 19th century. But the connection in the 20th century Union started to develop stronger connections to the Democratic Party. If you look to before that, say if you looked at 1900, most labor leaders actually tended to be Republican because they thought Republican was all about sort of growing business and the business grew, then Jobs would grow. What happened around World War One, was the Democratic Party started to back the war effort and the president that time was Woodrow Wilson who was a Democrat. The real strong connections between the Democratic Party and most labor unions, not all but many, really started in the 1930s and the New Deal. That's when you get the labor laws. In theory, they guarantee workers the rights to organize and form unions and bargain collectively and from the 1930s up until pretty much today many labor unions tend to look more favorably on Democratic candidates. So I would add there's always been tension. In 1972 most labor unions backed Richard Nixon. They thought George McGovern was too liberal and too anti-war. Recently again some unions have backed Republican candidates partly in fact because many Democratic candidates have become much more lukewarm on supporting organized labor.

***[VP] Well you mentioned that fewer people are members of unions now than in the past, and it once was thought that labor as a voting bloc could really sway an election. Is that still true?***

[DZ] I always remind people it’s both percentages and numbers. There are still about 15 million plus people who belong to labor unions in this country. So that's not a small number. And in certain states like New York, California, still a significant number of union members and union households and they can play a political role if a union endorses a candidate sometimes. Now unions are not allowed to spend their direct money but they can raise money for political action committees just like other groups can. So unions can help support candidates they can get their members out knocking on doors doing phone banking. So union endorsements still carry some influence in particular states in particular races. But the labor movement does not have the political clout it had 20 years ago, 40 years ago, 50 years ago.

***[VP] Interesting because Labor Parties exist in many countries especially in Europe, I'm thinking of powerful political forces, and in other countries around the world, but not in the U.S.. Why not?***

[DZ] Well that's a great question and there's many possible theories and answers that historians and sociologists have given why there hasn't been a stronger labor movement, a stronger Labor Party, left wing party socialist party, you can get a lot of different labels. Some of it has to do with our own American political system. The two party system makes it hard for a return of the parties to form. Some people argue it has to do with sort of American culture that we have a culture that prides itself on individualism and this ideal of social mobility. There's also been weaknesses within the labor movement itself toward politics. There has been various repression against people who've been on the left in this country. So there's a host of reasons I'm one of those people who argues it's sort of all the above. There's no one reason that you have to look at our politics our economics our social structure our culture. You have look at unions themselves there's all kinds of reasons.

***[VP] Well you are clearly a pro union guy. That's what I'm getting from speaking to you. So what would you say would be legitimate criticisms of unions and how they function and how they have functioned in the American economy?***

[DZ] Some unions have a history of corruption. Some unions not recently but in past generations have had a history of racism and sexism hostile to immigrants. All those things I think most unions today have a much better record of organizing in the in the workforce of today which is much more multicultural people of many faiths backgrounds ethnicities races. So I think when you look at that unions are doing a better job. But again if we were to turn the clock back a generation or two unions made a lot of mistakes so some of that criticism is justified in a historical perspective. I think today the level of corruption in most unions is in fact less than the level of corruption in politics. I mean not saying much but it's also less than the level of corruption in corporations. So again I'm not saying corruption is gone but it's far less of a problem than it was say in the 1950s. The one big criticism might be you know a lot of business people will say I don't want unions because they're going to raise my labor costs or it's going to introduce another party into my company and I want to run the place the way I want to run the place. The answer to that is those that's actually true. If you're running a business and unionize your wages will probably go up.

***[VP] So going forward in American civic life what role do you see unions playing?***

[DZ] That was a question actually I was asked recently at the state AFLCIO labor convention and my short answer was I see great potential and great potential for frustration. And what I mean by that is I think a lot of younger people, people in their 20s and 30s, a lot of them are struggling to find work or they've got work that's often you know putting together two or three part time jobs or they're working long hours at a job where they don't get many benefits and they don't see much advancement and a lot of them they almost say we want a union but they don't always use the word because they often don't quite know what a union is and that's why a program like this I think is a great idea to introduce people to just the basics of what a union is and what it does. So I think that some of what the labor movement has to do is to just get people to understand a bit more of what a union is and what it does and that the union today is not necessarily your granddaddy or your grandmamma's Union. They do have to take different forms and different strategies. And I think the labor movement can do that and if it can do that I think there's a lot of younger people sort of hungry some kind of way to get a better opportunities at the workplace.