

## Are Labor Unions Too Strong?

Written by Bill Fletcher, Jr.

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The other day I found myself engaged in a casual discussion with someone next to me on an airplane. In the course of the conversation, I mentioned that I had written two books on labor unions. The man responded that he thought that unions could be both good and not so good.

I am used to hearing such arguments. But he then added that he thought that "...sometimes, unions are too strong..."

There is something almost other-worldly when I hear someone suggest that unions are too strong. First, labor unions represent approximately 11-12 percent of the non-agricultural workforce. That means that about one out of 10 workers are in unions. That is not what one could describe as overwhelming strength.

Yet what I found most important about the comment was something that went beyond the facts. This gentleman had, in his mind, disconnected the matter of economic justice from the matter of institutions called labor unions. In other words, rather than seeing unions as organizations fighting for economic justice for workers—irrespective of whether they happen to be in unions—he saw unions as isolated institutions that look out for their members but no one else.

In fact, the gentleman on the plane was offering a criticism of labor unions that those of us who are active in unions (and/or support them) should take very seriously. It would be very difficult to believe that anyone who was not an outright apologist for corporations would have any issue with organizations fighting for economic justice. After all, can there be too much economic justice?

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On the other hand, if you look at labor unions as the equivalent of a lobby, such as the National Association of Home Builders, for example, then one could conceivably conclude that the institution could, under certain circumstances, be too strong. Please do not get me wrong, I am not saying that labor unions are or have been too strong. What I am suggesting is that if they are not viewed broadly as instruments for economic justice, they can be viewed as just another lobby or special interest group.

What this gentleman on the plane was suggesting actually represents the central challenge for those who believe in labor unions and economic justice. The union, as I have raised in my most recent book (*They're Bankrupting Us* – And Twenty Other Myths about Unions) is an organization of workers fighting to improve the conditions and living standards of workers. To the extent to which it defines that fight narrowly, the union may be viewed with jealousy, envy or resentment. To the extent to which it defines that fight in terms of the interests of workers generally, it has a better chance to succeed and win broad support.

The Chicago teachers' strike is a case in point. The teachers' union worked overtime to interact, learn from and hold discussion with parents and other community members such that when the strike unfolded, it actually became a popular strike for the children! The issues raised by the union were perceived not as special interests but as interests in favor of the parents and students.

As a matter of fact, I raised the issue of the Chicago teachers' strike with the gentleman on the plane. He looked at me cautiously and nodded his head. Point taken and registered.

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