

# **More Excerpts from *Why Unions Matter* By Michael D. Yates**

Compiled by PHILLIP W. WEISS

Unions have been permanent features of capitalist economies. Given the inherent conflict between workers and their employers, workers in most workplaces band together informally to improve their circumstances. However, unions provide workers with a more permanent and formal power at work.

Nonunion employers frequently raise wages and provide workers with some voice just to avoid unionization.

One primary function of a union is collective bargaining.

Collective bargaining agreements represent truces in the war between capital and labor.

Work has always been done by both men and women, but gender differences take on specific characteristics in capitalist economies.

Religion, ethnicity, race, and sexual orientation have also divided workers at one time or another in our history.

Feeling the pressure from below, the federal government under Franklin D. Roosevelt passed laws which, for the first time, gave workers certain fundamental rights. The Norris-LaGuardia Act of 1932 strictly limited the ability of employers to obtain injunctions in labor disputes. The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1937 provided for the payment of a minimum wage and overtime pay for hours in excess of forty per week.

Section 7 of the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) gives workers the right to form unions without employer interference and compels employers to bargain collectively with unions chosen by the employees. A federal agency, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), was established by the NLRA to investigate employer violations of the act and to conduct elections in which workers can freely choose whether or not they wanted to be represented by a union.

Since the passage of the NLRA, the vast majority of unions have been formed through the NLRB-conducted *representation elections*.

The NLRA does not cover all employees. Farm workers, domestic workers, railroad and airline workers, and public employees are the most important groups not covered. However, Congress and many state legislatures have passed laws similar to the NLRA which protect these workers.

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The principles underlying the NLRA are that, first, if a majority of the workers in a workplace want a union, they should have a way to get one without having to engage in direct actions [e.g., strikes, picketing, boycotts], and second, only one union should represent any particular group of workers. Further, the workers who decide to form a union must have common interests, by, for example, doing the same type of work. These workers form a *bargaining unit*.

Amendments to the original NLRA, as well as NLRB and court decisions, have greatly expanded the range of anti-union activities which an employer can use.

Over the past thirty years, unfair labor practices by employers have mushroomed, and union victory rates in elections have declined.

Most of the more than one hundred national and international unions in the United States are part of a still larger federation of unions, the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO).

The nature of our society allows our employers to “objectify” us, to treat us as objects or mere means to the end of making money.

When workers make suggestions for increasing productivity, they are giving to their employer the knowledge which will eventually allow the employer to speed up their work or eliminate their jobs.

It is in the interests of U.S. workers to help to raise the living standards of workers worldwide, because this reduces the ability of employers to pit one group of workers against another.

Human beings have the unique ability to conceptualize work tasks and then perform them. Yet most jobs utilize only a fraction of human ability. This leads to profound alienation and a hatred of work. Instead of seeing labor as the fulfillment of our humanity, we see it as a necessary evil to be avoided if at all possible.

At the same time that hundreds of millions of people worldwide cannot find enough work, millions of others are working hours comparable to those worked during the industrial revolution. People are working too much to enjoy life. Why should this be so?

Our employers are free to treat us as they please, even to cut our wages and eliminate our benefits. A union can, and usually does, change all of this.

SOURCE: Michael D. Yates, *Why Unions Matter* (Monthly Review Press, New York), 1988, pages 3, 19-20, 30, 31, 32, 34, 44, 105, 130, 131, 137, 148, 149, 150.

