The Face(book) of Unionism

Ray Gibney, School of Business Administration, Pennsylvania State University – Harrisburg, Middletown, PA, USA

Tom Zagenczyk, Department of Management, Clemson University, Clemson, SC, USA

Marick F. Masters, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, USA

ABSTRACT

Information Communication Technology (ICT) offers unions a greater capacity to build cohesion and expand membership. An important issue in assessing the potential benefits of ICT is the nature and scope of union members’ use of this technology. Unions must have an Internet presence. Using data from a 2010 Current Population Survey (CPS), the authors examine the extent to which union members have and use computers and the Internet. In addition, the authors review Facebook pages and Twitter accounts established by or for national labor organizations. The authors find that labor union usage of these social networks has not produced anticipated usage by members.

Keywords: Current Population Survey (CPS), Information Communication Technology (ICT), Labor Union, Social Networks, Technology

INTRODUCTION

Rapid advances in information communication technology (ICT) afford labor unions a vast array of means for connecting with their members, among each other, and with targeted groups of the general public. Enhanced connectivity arguably gives labor a better chance to build cohesion and solidarity, mobilize at the grassroots level, operate more transparently and democratically, and recruit and serve new members in remotely located or otherwise difficult to access areas. Labor’s ability to tap this potential depends heavily on the extent to which its members and the general public are “networked.” The current nature and scope of ICT usage provides a baseline from which unions can assess how best to use existing technologies to improve: (1) connectivity; (2) the gap that exists between practice and potential; and (3) the challenges faced in developing e-skills of current and future members.

Union leaders and observers recognize the potential of ICT to build a wider and stronger labor movement, not only in the U.S. but also globally. This potential is succinctly captured in the futuristic term Cyberunionism (Shostak, 1999; 2007). According to Shostak (2007:433): “A CyberUnion is a labor organization intent on endlessly making the most creative and empowering uses possible of computer power.” Such unionism connotes much more than being networked or digitally literate, it constitutes a new type of union, conceptually

DOI: 10.4018/ijep.2013100101
distinguishable from business unionism, that operates more efficiently and effectively due to increased productivity and connectivity afforded by ICT. ICT enables unions to exploit the manifold opportunities of “open-source” organizing (Freeman & Rogers, 2002) whereby unions can accrue members and expand services without necessarily having to achieve formal recognition, which, at least in the U.S., presents substantial legal obstacles.

We update and expand the limited literature on union members’ usage of ICT. In 2010, Masters, Gibney, Zagenzycyk and Shevchuk (2010) found that a digital divide existed between union and nonunion workers with respect to internet usage and connectivity. However, they utilized data from 2003. Based upon the rapidity of technology change and ubiquity of computing technology, this digital divide may have lessened or completely disappeared.

Specifically, we examine the extent to which union members have access to ICT, including the Internet; the nature and intensity of members ICT usage; and how union members compare to the general population in such usage. We use data collected from the 2010 Current Population Survey (CPS) compiled in the Computer and Internet Use Supplement (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). Our data update comparable information reported by Diamond and Freeman (2002) from the August 2000 CPS supplement and Masters et al. (2010). We may safely infer that both union members and the general population are more intense ICT users today than they were in 2003, as five years is a long time in the realm of ICT, which is exploding in usage via WiFi and WiMax. Yet, there is still considerable potential for growth in promoting a networked workforce: the Pew Internet & American Life Project’s 2008 survey reports that 62 percent of the workforce is “networked” meaning they “use the Internet or email at their workplace” (Madden & Jones, 2008: i). In addition, the Global Information Technology Report 2007-2008 (World Economic Forum 2008) explicitly recognizes the continual need for more e-skill development.

BACKGROUND

A growing body of research examines the role of ICT in unions. The literature falls into three overlapping streams: (1) a review of how unions use ICT (e.g., Fiorito & Bass, 2002; Greer, 2002; Stevens & Greer, 2005); (2) the impact of IT on union effectiveness (e.g., Fiorito, Jarley, & Delaney, 2002); and (3) the potential benefits IT offers unions and the broader labor movement, both domestically and globally. Most studies treat the union as the unit of analysis, examining, for example, unions’ usage of the web. Diamond and Freeman (2002) offer one of the few analyses of actual union members’ use of IT, studying usage primarily among U.K. rank-and-file and to a lesser extent among U.S. unionists.

This mounting literature documents labor’s expanding use of ICT and generally extols the potential benefits as a means to revitalize unions. Diamond and Freeman (2002), for example, have posed several hypotheses to this effect, arguing that IT has the potential to promote union organizing; enhance union democracy; facilitate international unionism; and alter the way labor disputes are handled so as to mobilize pro-union sentiment. At the same time, however, researchers recognize that ICT, in and of itself, is not a panacea, but merely a means to an end. ICT, for example, allows for greater speed in communications, but does not improve the content of the message. Furthermore, ICT may, as Chaison (2002) observes, pose dangers to the labor movement, creating even more distance between union members and giving workers an alternative non-union “voice.” To exploit ICT effectively, unions need to fold it into their modus operandi strategically, as implied by the term cyberunionism.

A critical variable in the potential benefits of IT is the extent to which union members use these technologies. Diamond and Freeman (2002: 570) emphasize this point:

*If unionists were not making extensive use of the Internet, the study of the role of the Internet in
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www.igi-global.com/chapter/metacognition-educational-social-software/38158?camid=4v1a

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