



Unions And Democratic Change

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What are unions?

Unions are organizations that provide collective voice and collective power to working people, with a particular focus on their working lives.

SOLIDARITY, or the idea of working together to achieve the common good of all working people, is at the core of unionism.



Albert O. Hirschman, Exit, Voice and Loyalty

In Hirschman's classic theory, when we confront a negative situation with unacceptable conditions, we have two choices:

- **Exit**, or leaving the situation and looking for better conditions; and
- **Voice**, or working to improve the current situation and conditions.

Exit is the market option: we don't like the conditions of our job, so we quit and look for another job with better conditions.

Voice is the democracy option: we work together with others who face same situation to improve conditions for all.



We traditionally think of unions as organizations which seek better wages and working conditions for their members. Unions do that – but they also do a great deal more...

Unions give voice to their members, organizing them to improve their lives.

UNIONS:

- Make workplaces more democratic
- Improve quality of products and services their members produce
- Develop the work related knowledge and skills of their members
- Enhance the community in which members live
- Build political power for their members and working people in general



Richard Freeman and James Medoff

What Do Unions Do?

Evidence shows that unions:

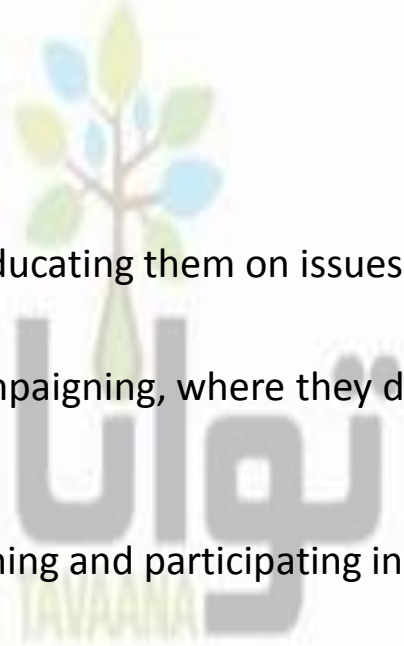
- Establish wage premium for their members and raise wages for all working people
- By improving wages, generate a greater market for products in a virtuous cycle of economic growth
- Encourage business owners to invest capital in improved technology in unionized jobs
- Lower turnover and build skills in unionized jobs
- Promote inter-business co-operation
- Replace 'race to the bottom' with 'race to the top'

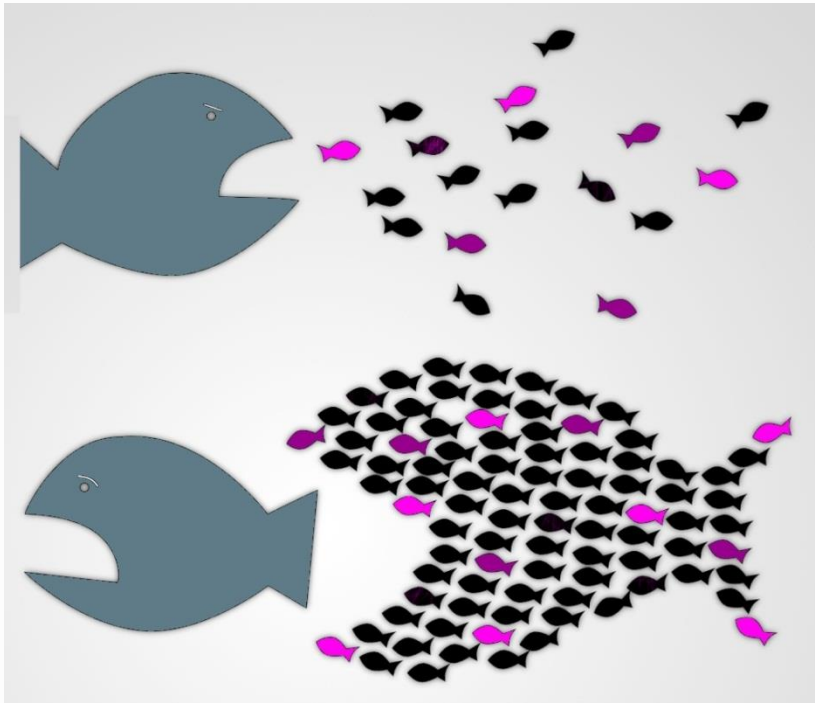
Unions: Schoolhouses of Democracy

In a democracy, unions

- Register members to vote
- Engage members in elections, educating them on issues and candidates
- Involve members in election campaigning, where they develop skills of political discourse
- Teach members the skills of running and participating in a democratic meeting
- Develop consensus building skills as members learn how to prepare for collective action
- Prepare members to negotiate with employers and achieve agreements with adversaries

Even under authoritarian rule, unions teach their members many of these skills.





Central to the idea of an union is **collective action**:
as an organized group, the union
can accomplish far more than
individual members acting alone
can.

Unions had their origins in the response of working people to great economic and inequality, conditions which have, if anything, increased in recent decades. Inequality leaves individual workers at great disadvantage.

Unions provide a counterweight to the great concentrations of private economic wealth and political power.

Union Anthem “Solidarity Forever”

When the union's inspiration through the workers' blood shall run,
There can be no power greater anywhere beneath the sun;
Yet what force on earth is weaker than the feeble strength of one,
But the union makes us strong.

CHORUS:

Solidarity forever,
Solidarity forever,
Solidarity forever,
For the union makes us strong.

Unions Have Been In Forefront Of Struggles Against Authoritarian States

- The democratic changes of 1989 and the years of the late 1980s and early 1990s had insurgent unions in the lead, from Solidarnosc in Poland to the democratic unions of South Africa, Chile and Brazil
- Unions were in the forefront of the Arab Spring, from Morocco and Tunisia to Egypt's El Tahrir Square
- Unions are on the front line of struggles for democratic change today, from the Ukraine to Bangladesh and from Cambodia to Zimbabwe.

Of all the Institutions of Civil Society, Authoritarian and Totalitarian States Feel Most Threatened By Free Unions



The power of unions in the organized voice and collective action of working people is a threat to dictatorships everywhere.

Authoritarian and totalitarian states, such as China's Communist elite during the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, fear the development of independent unions the most.





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