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CHAPTER I

Problems of Measurement

UNION membership is interesting and important as an index of the strength of organized labor. It is clearly an imperfect index since the power of trade unionism often manifests itself in forms that are difficult to express in terms of membership. In established unions the strength of an organization is, or should be, reflected in the sum of its achievements. But the gains made by labor in a complicated economic society, subject to the impact of innumerable forces, cannot as a rule be accurately attributed to any single cause or factor. The strength of young organizations may be proportionate to the number of employees they can count on in the event of a strike. How large this number is can be determined in most instances only after a strike has been called, and even then usually not until it has been going for some time. Participation in strikes, moreover, does not necessarily signify membership in a union. For these reasons the records frequently disclose substantial discrepancies between the membership of a union and the number it has succeeded in involving in strikes. Membership, likewise, may be, and has been in this country, at least, a totally inadequate barometer of political influence, because of the wide gulf between adherence to a labor movement through membership in it and the sympathy for the aspirations of organized labor that is expressed by casting a ballot for its policies and the candidates it endorses.

Although records of membership have these defects in reflecting the changing power, prestige, or influence of labor movements, which is what people have in mind when they speak of the strength of unions, they remain the most reliable and continuous source of measurement of the growth and decline of organized labor. Since in this country unions, like political parties, are still voluntary organizations which men join and quit as the spirit moves them, membership fluctuates frequently and substantially in response to developments in industry, law and politics which in familiar ways affect the views and conduct of employees. Compared to other indices of union importance—such as the number participating in strikes, changes in wages and hours, and the votes in legislative bodies on labor measures—the data of membership appear in the long run most faithfully to represent the state of unionism.

The most readily available source of membership statistics is naturally the record of the union itself. Most of the modern labor unions are elaborate organizations engaged in a wide variety of activities. They negotiate with management over working conditions, conduct strikes, employ staffs of organizers to extend the boundaries of organization, publish newspapers, magazines and other matter, retain lobbyists and press agents to represent them in dealing with Federal and local governments and the public, and provide their members with certain beneficial and insurance measures. In the exercise of these assorted functions, the common run of union collects initiation fees, dues, assessments, premiums and fines and altogether bears the earmarks of a substantial business undertaking. Like private concerns, unions have their financial offices and staffs, and keep the requisite accounts subject to periodic, independent audit. Where these accounts are published

in sufficient detail, they are the most reliable source of information on membership. But where they are not issued in satisfactory form, the investigator must rely for his data on the statements of the union officers with whom he is in communication. Since labor unions are among other things political and propaganda organizations which depend for their position in part on the prestige they inspire, the reported figures of membership are often quite other than prevailing conditions and general knowledge would lead one to expect. This is, of course, especially true during critical periods when extensive campaigns of organization are being waged and reputation for strength or weakness is considered to count heavily with prospective members, the government, and the public.

Inquiries on union membership undertaken by the National Bureau of Economic Research at various times in 1931, 1933, 1934, and 1935,¹ have in some instances elicited estimates of membership that illustrate this temptation to make claims not always supported by the record. Particularly since June 16, 1933, the date of the approval of the National Industrial Recovery Act when some of the most spirited and extensive organization efforts in the history of American labor began, has the divergence between announced and recorded statistics of membership tended to become wider than usual. While a part of the divergency is due to the sporadic character of recent events in labor relations

¹ The form of question asked by the National Bureau is indicated in the following letter sent to all the unions on its lists:

"The National Bureau of Economic Research is now preparing for publication a study of the growth of trade unionism during the post-war period. Your union has been most helpful in the past in supplying us with information for this study. We have received from you figures representing your average membership in good standing for each of the years from 1923 to 1932. We should like to bring these figures up to date. Would you, therefore, send us figures for the average membership of your union in good standing during the years 1933 and 1934?"

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and to peculiar developments in union growth in the last two years, much is attributable to the methods and enthusiasms of the organization campaign. How great the discrepancy can be is shown in estimates of membership reported at various times in 1933 and 1934 by the United Textile Workers, given in Table 1.

TABLE 1
UNITED TEXTILE WORKERS, MEMBERSHIP, 1931-1934

DATE	FIRST REPORT ¹	SECOND REPORT ²	THIRD REPORT ³
1931	30,000	30,000
1932	27,500	27,500
1933	150,000 ⁴	55,000	230,000 ⁶
January 1934	100,000 ⁵	275,000 ⁶
July 1934	350,000 ⁶

¹ Letter from the union dated November 3, 1933.

² *Ibid.*, January 19, 1934.

³ *Ibid.*, September 7, 1934.

⁴ As of October 1933.

⁵ As of January 10, 1934.

⁶ Described by the union as approximate.

Large as the differences in these estimates are, it is a mistake to assume that they are all figments of the imagination and have no basis in fact. The United Textile Workers has since the middle of 1933 run the gamut of experiences typically encountered by weak unions in attempts to extend the area of their control over industry. Claiming jurisdiction over employees in all the primary branches of the textile industry—the manufacture of cotton, wool, silk and rayon cloths—this union has in the last several years successively attacked each of these divisions of the industry with organizing activities and strikes. In the great cotton textile strike of 1934, initiated and managed by the United Textile Workers,

several hundred thousand employees left the mills. On this occasion, and while the result of the conflict was still uncertain, the efforts of union officers and organizers seemed to be rewarded by a rush of new members who attested their affiliation with the union by signing applications for membership or merely by participating in striking and picketing. When the strike was ended and the men returned to work, whether through inertia, indifference, disappointment, opposition of the employers or what not, they failed to pay the initiation fees which they had promised to pay or ceased to pay the dues which they had begun to pay, and union membership measured by these standards sharply declined. Episodes like this have since 1933 occurred in all the other branches of the textile industry and were indeed not uncommon in the history of textile unions even before the World War. They account for the dramatic apparent rise and fall from time to time in the membership of the United Textile Workers and for the marked discrepancies in the estimates of the union recorded in Table 1.

These reports by the United Textile Workers may be said to provide an extreme instance of a practice often met in gathering membership data. The estimates in Table 2, furnished by the officers of four unions, further illustrate the point.

Difficulties such as these may be overcome, in part at least, by using the membership data annually reported by the American Federation of Labor. Approximately four-fifths of the total membership of American labor unions is that of unions affiliated with the Federation. Voting strength in the annual conventions of the Federation is proportionate to the per capita tax that the affiliated unions pay to the Federation on their membership. The figures

TABLE 2

MEAT CUTTERS, UPHOLSTERERS, HOTEL AND RESTAURANT
EMPLOYEES, AND LONGSHOREMEN UNIONS, MEMBERSHIP,
1933 AND 1934

NAME OF UNION	DATE	FIRST REPORT ¹	SECOND REPORT ²	THIRD REPORT ³
Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen	1933	35,000	18,000	.....
	Jan. 10, 1934	35,000	20,000	.....
	July 1934	.....	22,000	.....
Upholsterers, Carpet and Linoleum Mechanics	1933	4,650	9,000	.....
	Jan. 10, 1934	5,207	10,150	.....
	July 1934	.....	11,000	.....
Hotel and Restaurant Employees	1933	23,943	32,211	26,612
	Jan. 10, 1934	30,521	34,119	} 47,449 ⁴
	July 1934	.....	45,561	
Longshoremen	1933	24,451	23,369	.....
	Jan. 1-10, 1934	22,325	42,774 ⁵	.....
	July 1934	.....	33,431	.....

¹ Letters from unions in January and February 1934.

² *Ibid.*, August 1934.

³ *Ibid.*, March 1, 1935.

⁴ Average for the year 1934.

⁵ Average for January 1934.

of voting strength, from which membership is computed,² are published annually in the reports of the Executive Council of the American Federation of Labor. Except for occasional large

² Since 1897 each annual report of the convention proceedings of the American Federation of Labor has contained a table showing the voting strength of each affiliated national or international union and of all directly affiliated local unions. According to the constitution of the Federation (Art. IV, sec. 3) each delegate to the annual convention may "cast one vote for every one hundred members or major fraction thereof he represents". The voting strength of a union is computed from the monthly payment of per capita tax to the Federation (Art. IV, sec. 4). The membership of each organization is, therefore, obtained by multiplying its voting strength by one hundred.

discrepancies in the recorded membership of single unions, this source may be considered as yielding conservative and comparable estimates of the aggregate membership of those unions which are a part of the Federation. Of the unions independent of the Federation and consequently not included in its reports, the largest are the organizations of railroad train service employees. Since they are all old and strong unions, accustomed as most unions of this type are to keep and publish reliable records, the statistics of membership that they themselves furnish can be accepted with a high degree of confidence.

All statistics of membership based on the collection of dues and per capita taxes naturally reflect fluctuations in employment and unemployment. Especially since 1929, when many bona fide members of unions have been unable to pay their dues because of prolonged idleness, the available figures probably understate the actual strength of some organizations. Conversely, before 1929 many unions exaggerated their membership. How large the underestimate in recent years has been the records do not disclose, but the reports of a few unions show that it may, on occasion, be appreciable. The United Textile Workers wrote in 1931: "We continue to pay the American Federation of Labor on 30,000 members. We were paying on this number in 1923 and are paying on the same number today. . . . We are carrying on our books approximately 30,000 (additional) who are either unemployed or working under two and three days a week, conditions which make it impossible for them to pay their dues regularly." In 1935 the papermakers union, likewise, reported: "Our membership in 1934 was 21,000. We paid per capita tax to the American Federation of Labor on 11,500 members. The remainder were not working full time." The Executive Council of the Federation,

commenting on the factor of partial and total unemployment, stated in 1934:³

“National and international organizations are required to pay the per capita tax upon their full paid-up membership and, therefore, the membership does not include all the members who were unemployed during the fiscal year.

A survey of the membership of the national and international organizations and the unions directly affiliated with the American Federation of Labor shows that the reason for the comparatively small increase in membership is due almost entirely to the unemployment of members of national and international unions and directly affiliated local unions.”

Offsetting the effects of prevailing unemployment on dues-paying membership is the tendency, already noted, of unions to exaggerate their strength in order to enhance their prestige in the eyes of members, the public and employers. Affiliated organizations, also, will often pay per capita taxes to the Federation on an over-estimated membership in order to maintain their voting strength in the annual conventions of the American Federation of Labor. Many unions have in this way not only overstated their membership at any given time, but have also concealed the year-to-year fluctuations in membership to which all unions are subject. The influence of all these factors is illustrated in the various statistics of membership of the United Mine Workers, the largest union in the American Federation of Labor. From 1923 to 1931 it paid per capita taxes to the Federation on 400,000 members. In view of the changing state of the industry as well as the growth of the non-union area after 1923, the probabilities are that the membership of the union had in this period measurably declined.

³ *Report to the 54th Annual Convention, October 1, 1934, p. 7.*

The relation, further, between paid-up and other membership since 1929 is shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3

UNITED MINE WORKERS, MEMBERSHIP, 1929-1934

MEMBERSHIP REPORTED BY THE UNION

DATE	MEMBERSHIP REPORTED BY THE		Exonerated	Total paid-up and exonerated
	A. F. OF L. ¹	Paid-up		
1929	400,000	169,301	92,855	262,156
1930	400,000	140,065	81,613	221,678
1931	400,000	158,250	143,000	301,250
1932	308,300	129,212	187,522	316,734
1933	300,000	135,285	162,484	297,769
January 1934	300,000 ³	362,000	95,000	457,000
July 1934				
		403,883	124,802	528,685

¹ Annual reports, A. F. of L. Executive Council.

² Letters from the union dated August 28 and September 18, 1933; and replies to letters dated January 11, July 24, August 2 and September 7, 1934.

³ Average for the year ended August 31, 1934.

Exonerated membership the union defines as follows: ⁴ "Under our law, persons on strike, unemployed, and those who do not work five or more days in any one month are granted exoneration and at the same time their membership is maintained in good standing." It is significant that the membership reported by the American Federation of Labor is, until 1932, far in excess of the combined paid-up and exonerated membership of the union, the excess ranging from 180,000 in 1930 to 100,000 in 1931. The rise in the exonerated and, therefore, in the combined membership in 1932 is puzzling since by all available evidence the strength of the union was then at its lowest ebb.

Although many unions differentiate between their employed

⁴ Letter from the union dated July 6, 1931.

and unemployed members, or between those in good standing and in arrears, and, in addition, pay per capita tax to the Federation on still another membership, practice in respect of all these methods is so diverse that it is quite impossible to derive a formula that could translate one estimate of membership into another. Several further examples will suffice to throw light on the various methods of estimating membership used by American unions. The National Federation of Post Office Clerks explains⁵ that the

“American Federation of Labor figures cover only national per capita membership—and not all of that. We have a great many members who for various reasons do not pay national per capita tax. Some of these are on the civil service retirement roll, others function as local officers and are therefore excused from the payment of tax, while again it is the policy of some of our locals not to pay on the entire membership. To illustrate, our local in Chicago has an actual membership of 4,200 while per capita tax is paid on 3,500. The difference represents to a large extent the members who act as dues collectors and in various official capacities and for these services . . . they are not required to pay dues, although to all intents and purposes they are bona fide members.”

The national union of iron molders, which was earlier in its history one of the large and more powerful American craft unions, paid per capita taxes to the American Federation of Labor on a constant membership of 50,000 each year, 1907–18. The membership of this union reported by the Federation fluctuated thereafter annually, but the union distinguishes⁶ on its own records between the membership on which it pays per capita taxes to the Federation and its ‘actual’ membership, which includes “members who are out of employment or who are employed at work

⁵ Letter from the union dated July 9, 1931.

⁶ Letter from the union dated March 1, 1935.

other than the trade of molding". The differences between these two sets of data are shown in Table 4.

TABLE 4

INTERNATIONAL MOLDERS UNION, MEMBERSHIP, 1923-1934

DATE	REPORTED BY THE A. F. OF L. ¹	REPORTED BY THE UNION ²
1923	32,100	37,470
1924	33,600	37,231
1925	27,500	31,359
1926	28,400	30,474
1927	26,500	29,122
1928	23,200	26,802
1929	23,700	26,480
1930	21,800	22,249
1931	15,200	18,415
1932	9,500	15,400
1933	6,000	17,351
1934	8,800	20,233

¹ Annual reports, A. F. of L. Executive Council.

² Reply by the union to letter dated March 4, 1935.

Comparison of these figures of membership with those for the United Mine Workers illustrates again the sharp diversity among unions in policy and practice. While the miners union was paying per capita taxes to the American Federation of Labor on a membership greatly in excess of its combined paid-up and exonerated membership, the tax payment of the molders union was limited by the number of its members in good standing. The Federation data consequently reflect much more accurately changes in the position of the molders union than in that of the United Mine Workers. The ratio, moreover, of members in arrears to those in good standing was, for the molders, relatively low until 1932, but for the miners it was always high, and in several

of the years recorded in Table 3 the number exonerated exceeded the number in good standing. These marked discrepancies raise an interesting, if unanswerable, question concerning the procedure followed by unions in dropping delinquent members.

The membership data of American unions being what they are it is clear that the choice among materials must rest upon as careful an examination as is possible of the available statistics for each. Since the membership of some twenty national unions accounts for a very large share of the total membership of all labor unions, this examination can for all practical purposes be limited to the larger organizations. In nearly all cases of doubt accessible collateral information—such as the size of the industry, the relative extent of its organized and unorganized sections, the union's reputed strength, and the size of strikes—has proved of great assistance in judging the relative value of conflicting data.

In this study, then, the source of membership figures most frequently used is the annual report of the Executive Council of the American Federation of Labor. Where the figures clearly understate the membership of a union, whether because of failure to make adequate allowance for unemployment and underemployment or because the union deliberately reduces its payment of per capita taxes to the Federation, or where they exaggerate membership in order to enhance the union's prestige or to preserve its political position within the Federation, they are replaced by series supplied by the union itself but in every instance subjected to extensive examination and check. Viewed over a relatively long period and tested by our general knowledge of the course of industrial relations in this country, the series of membership statistics gathered in this way appear to be a dependable index of the ebb and flow in American trade unionism.