

THE AMERICAN PROSPECT

Why Joining a Union is Good For Your Well-Being

by Sean McElwee & Benjamin Radcliff • July 16, 2015

New research suggests that workplace organizing is key to personal happiness and overall well-being.



AP Photo/Matt Rourke

A Protestor gestures as he demonstrates to push fast-food chains to pay their employees at least \$15 an hour, outside during a march to a McDonald's restaurant Thursday, September 4, 2014, in Philadelphia.

American labor unions are facing a political assault unparalleled since the New Deal, from the Trans-Pacific Partnership to “right-to-work,” to the attack on public sector unions at the state level. And there’s a good chance it’ll just get worse. Ahead of Scott Walker’s possible nomination in the race for 2016, Republicans in Congress are already floating the “National Right to Work Act.” If passed it would create a legal environment more hostile to the rights of workers than in any industrial democracy. Any conceivable Republican president would certainly sign such a bill if it reached his or her desk. As is well known, these laws dramatically and purposely reduce workers’ ability to collectively bargain. Already, half of American states are right-to-work. A national right-to-work law would be a catastrophe for organized labor, pushing America’s already anemic unionization rate drastically lower still.

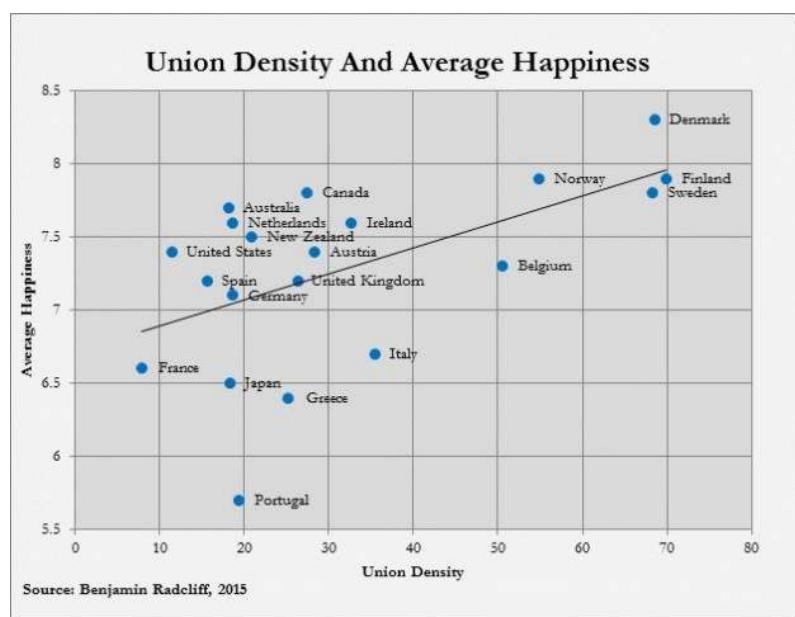
With so much at stake for American labor, it’s worth reflecting on how organized labor remains a viable player in our economy and politics. Perhaps the most basic question of all is whether unions contribute to a world in which people are more likely to lead positive and rewarding lives. A question like that lies at the center of an emerging field called “happiness economics” which explores things like quality of life, life satisfaction, and overall well-being, all of which unions undoubtedly contribute to. As recent research shows, not only do those belonging to unions themselves lead happier lives (controlling for other factors), but, far importantly, the overall rate of union membership (union “density”) is strongly and positively associated with overall levels of well-being. The connection between unions and happiness is additionally supported by other scholars,

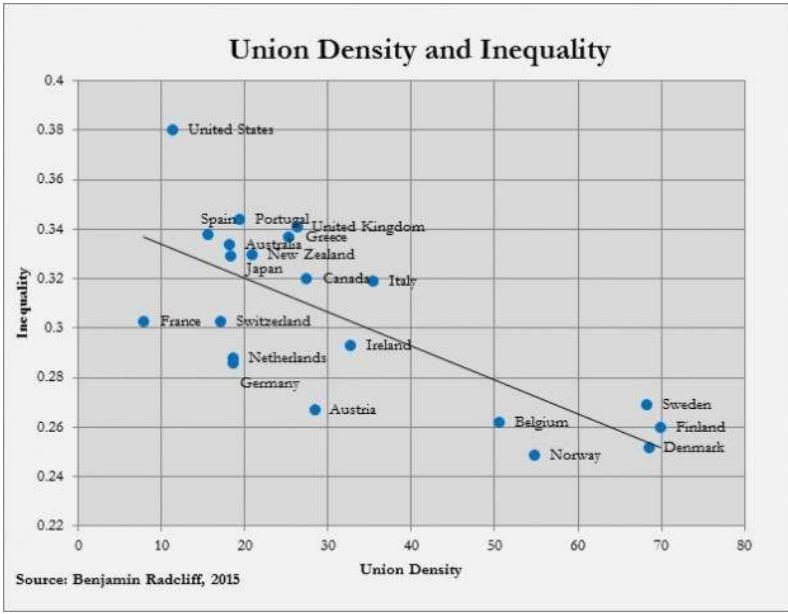
such as Patrick Flavin and Greg Shufeldt, who similarly find that in the United States, members of unions are happier than otherwise similar non-members

The chart below illustrates this idea vividly: higher levels of labor organization are strongly associated with higher levels of well-being. This relationship, and all relationships in this piece, are both statistically significant and remain so when controlling for other factors known to affect happiness, such as GDP per capita, unemployment, and differences in national cultures.

As you can see, the results show a sharp divergence. While Nordic countries like Denmark and Finland are among the happiest in the world—and boast unionization rates near 70 percent—countries like the U.S. enjoy much lower rates of both.

Why the relationship? First, of course, union members





tend to enjoy higher wages and better benefits than the unorganized. This “wage premium” that accrues to an otherwise average worker who belongs to a union is estimated by a recent study to amount to a staggering \$551,000 over a lifetime. Further, when unions are strong, non-union employers must of necessity attempt to match union wages, so as to attract the best workers, driving up the wage floor for all.

But the benefits go much further than that. In addition to higher wages, a union contract provides greater job security and protection from arbitrary dismissal. Union representation can also bring a sense of empowerment that comes from having a formalized grievance procedure and a collective say in how the workplace is managed. And more broadly, a collaborative union environment can reduce job-related stress and promote higher levels of social capital and human connection that unions naturally produce among members and their families.

It is also widely agreed that unions play an important role in fostering and protecting those public policies that their defenders believe benefit everyone—such as higher minimum wages, unemployment insurance, student loans, Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and so on. Labor has also been instrumental in promoting labor market norms and regulations that we take for granted, including the eight-hour day and (lest we forget) the very idea of the “weekend.”

Above all, through the totality of their political and economic influence, unions reduce the economic inequality associated with all manner of social pathologies including “everything from life expectancy to infant mortality and obesity” to say nothing of rates of violent crime. According to data compiled by Martin Gilens, unions also advocate

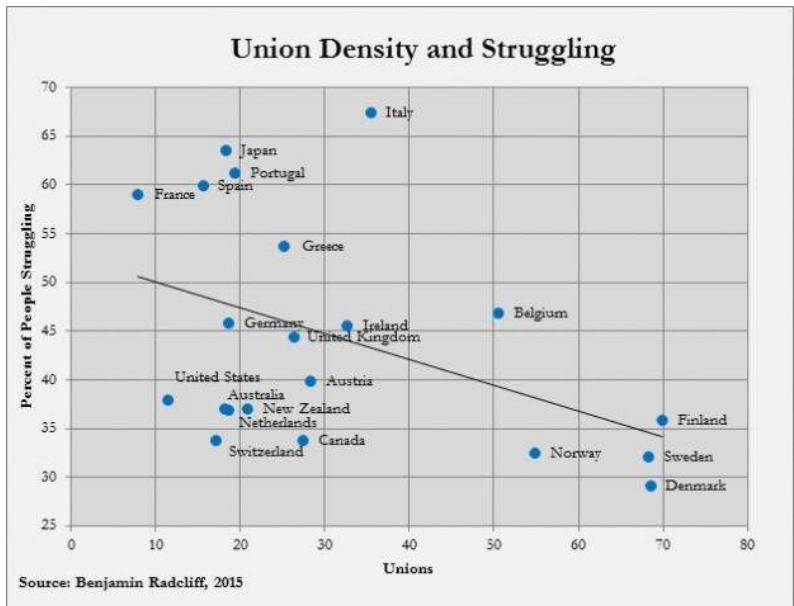
for policies supported by the majority of Americans, while corporations and their lobbying groups advocate for policies Americans dislike.

In turn, the new research shows that the relationship between inequality and unionization rates could not be clearer, as seen in the chart below. As the data illustrate, inequality (as measured by the conventional Gini coefficient with data from the late 2000s) declines sharply as union density increases (data from The Quality of Government Institute).

Again, Scandinavia seems to have the rest of the world beat with strong unionization rates and very low inequality. Simply stated, higher rates of unionization mean less inequality. Unions help produce a more equal, and thus, a more just and equitable society of shared prosperity.

Further evidence in support of the contribution of unions to human well-being can be seen in the connection between labor organization and the degree to which people are succeeding in the totality of their day to day lives. Gallup has created provides a convenient index of the share of a country's populating that is “struggling” in this overall sense, based on aggregating a number of standard survey questions (what psychologists call the Cantril Self-Anchoring Striving Scale).

As the next chart shows, how many people are “struggling” has everything to do with how many people belong to a union in their society.



In short, the larger the share of the workforce organized into unions, the smaller is the share of a country's population that finds life to be a struggle. You'd be hard pressed to find a more compelling argument for how strong unions are key to democratic, well-adjusted societies.