

**Mitchell’s Musings 2-3-2014: A Small Part**

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*“We are a **small part** of the 150 million Americans who work for a living.”*

AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka<sup>1</sup>

California’s Field Poll has long sampled public opinion in the state on a wide range of issues. Prior musings have been critical about polls – not just Field – that purport to provide detailed attitudes on complicated issues about which the public in fact knows little. Usually, the pollster provides an interpretation of the issue – perhaps a proposed ballot proposition – so that issue framing makes the response reported problematic. However, such concerns are less bothersome when it comes to general attitudes on broad issues such as, say, gay marriage.



A recent Field Poll asked some general questions about labor unions. Of course, the responses reported apply only to California; Field doesn’t do out-of-state polling. But there may be some national implication in the findings.

**California Union Representation Rates: 1983–2013**

	All Sectors	Private	Public	Public as Percent of Total
1983	25.9%	19.7%	57.2%	36.5%
1993	20.4	12.7	56.6	48.4
2003	18.4	10.7	58.1	51.7
2013	17.4	9.6	57.7	53.6
Note: U.S. in 2013	12.4	7.5	38.7	49.3

Source: [www.unionstats.com](http://www.unionstats.com)

Note: “Representation” includes union members and non-members covered by union agreements.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in “AFL-CIO Convention finds labor in need of new friends, new blood,” *The Postal Record*, October 2013, p. 4.

As the table on the previous page indicates, the overall (all sector) union representation rate has been falling for many years in California (as it has in the U.S.), although the state has a higher rate than the U.S. as a whole. This difference between the U.S. and California rates is largely a reflection of the much higher public unionization rate in California than in the U.S. That rate has not shown a downward trend, unlike the private rate. As a result, the 21<sup>st</sup> century union image in California is no longer that of a manufacturing or construction blue collar worker, but rather a public sector employee.

By and large, the labor law surrounding the public sector in California has been union-friendly. Current statutes vary by sector within state and local government. But all are largely cribbed from the federal Wagner/Taft-Hartley framework. Public workers in California, with some exceptions for public safety employees, have the right to strike. Public sector unions have become important sources of campaign contributions for state and local politicians, essentially all Democrats. California has become a “blue” state. At the state level, Republicans currently hold no major statewide offices. They represent under a third of the seats in the legislature, which means Democrats hold a two-thirds “supermajority” that is important for certain political actions such as putting propositions on the state ballot.

Field Poll: Do Unions Do More Good than Harm or More Harm than Good?\*

	Good>Harm	Harm>Good	Neutral	No Opinion
Dec. 2013	40%	45%	3%	11%
Mar. 2011	46	35	9	10
Apr. 1984	45	45	5	5
Oct. 1977	51	34	7	8

\*Asked of registered voters.

Source: [www.field.com](http://www.field.com). Click on archives. Polls of Dec. 13, 2013 and Mar. 17, 2011.

As can be seen on the table above, voters in California have not see unions as a majority net good since the 1970s. During the conservative 1980s – when unions were sometimes blamed for “stagflation” – voters were essentially split over net good vs. net harm. In 2011, while less than half tilted toward net good, that group was a plurality. But by 2013, the balance had shifted so that the plurality now tilted toward net harm.

During that two-year period, there was essentially no shift in the net good view of voters in union households (64% down to 62%). But the net harm group among union households rose from 18% to 31%. Net good among nonunion households dropped from 41% to 35% and net harm rose from 41% to 49%. It does appear that something happened to the image of unions in those two years. But what was the cause?

One possible answer was some strikes and on-and-off strike threats during 2013 among workers and unions on the San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit system (BART). There is some support for this view if questions are asked specifically about strikes. The Field Poll asked whether public transit workers

should be allowed to strike. In the San Francisco Bay Area – with its generally liberal politics, 52% favored banning such strikes while 41% would allow them. In the also-generally liberal Los Angeles County area, 37% favored a ban while 55% opposed it. (There were no transit strikes in the Los Angeles area in 2013.) So there was more anti-transit strike settlement in the area served by BART.

However, when the general issue of whether unions do more good than harm or more harm than good was raised, attitudes in the two areas were about the same and showed about the same shift (toward net harm) during 2011-2013:

*Los Angeles, Net Good: 45% down from 53%.*

*San Francisco, Net Good: 45% down from 50%*

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*Los Angeles, Net Harm: 39% up from 29%*

*San Francisco, Net Harm: 41% up from 30%*

In short, it seems likely that between 2011 and 2013, there was more to the attitudinal shift than just the BART labor dispute. If that view is correct, then the settlement of the BART dispute may not make a difference in the opinion of voters regarding unions in the future. That is, the more negative image of unions in 2013 may not be a one-time blip.

What may have occurred was not just one event, but a series of developments, combined with the shift in union coverage toward the public sector and away from the private. These developments may have created a more general view of unions as a special interest that is focused on the welfare of government employees. In California, as elsewhere, there has been considerable publicity around the issue of unfunded liabilities of public sector retirement programs. At present, it appears there may be a ballot initiative on the subject in November or possibly later. The legislature passed a pension bill, largely focused on new hires at the behest of (Democratic) Governor Jerry Brown. These efforts have generally been resisted by public sector unions.

Similarly, there has been publicity over K-12 “teacher tenure” and the difficulty in firing teachers despite publicized cases of egregious conduct. At present, there is a court case challenging teacher seniority systems on civil rights grounds. It is being argued by the plaintiffs that poor and minority children bear the brunt of teacher layoffs by reverse order of seniority. The merits of all of these campaigns and efforts can be debated. But unions typically come off as resisting reforms. While the Field Poll is exclusive to California, California is a more union-friendly state than average, as noted earlier. So it is likely similar results are occurring in other parts of the U.S., even if pollsters there are not looking at the issue.

One of the paradoxes of the union movement is that while it is based on the idea that effective worker representation must be *collective* rather than individual, unions are linked together – to the extent they are linked – in rather loose federations. The national AFL-CIO cannot tell individual member unions

what to do. It can only consolidate resources for use in lobbying and public relations. The same is true for union federations at the state and local level.

Thus, to the extent that the activities of a particular union in bargaining or otherwise may compromise the image of other unions, there is little restraint. Each union ultimately does what it thinks is in the interest of its own members. In that sense, collective action is downplayed relative to individual action.

A decade and a half ago, I wrote a piece on what the labor movement might do differently, since many of the trends discussed above were already evident. I suggested more use of financial participation to stabilize employment and reduce layoffs and more use of interest arbitration to settle disputes.<sup>2</sup> Basically, I noted that large-scale layoffs and strikes, if nothing else, create image problems for unions. At one time, union workers were seen as more secure in the private sector than their nonunion counterparts. But that is not so now in the public mind. Most employees (and voters) are in the private sector. A sense that unions are not able to avoid layoffs and disruption except in the public sector tends to undermine general support for unions.

This musing started with a quote by Richard Trumka made at the 2013 AFL-CIO convention. At that convention, he spoke about a need for organized labor to present itself as working for the employee-interest in general, not just for those workers who are union-represented. I also wrote about that approach in the earlier piece. But it is difficult in the end to make that image real in a system in which every union does its own thing. As noted, it is unclear whether the BART strike in fact was the cause of the attitudinal change reflected in the Field Poll. But were other unions outside BART part of the decision process that led to the strike? Do unions that are not representing teachers have any voice when legislative or bargaining issues come up regarding “teacher tenure” or teacher discipline? There is always the possibility that such actions might have some (negative) impact on larger public and voter perceptions. So there is a collective interest.

There is the old adage about the choice between hanging together and hanging separately. Changing the institutional arrangements of organized labor to more collective control from the center would be difficult, maybe impossible. But I will close with another remark of Trumka’s that he made during an interview at the convention:

*“The crisis for labor has deepened. It’s at a point where we really must do something differently. We really have to experiment.”<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel J.B. Mitchell, “Ensuring a Future for the American Labor Movement” in J.A. Auerbach, ed., *Through a Glass Darkly: Building the New Workplace for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (National Planning Association, 1998). Available at: [http://www.anderson.ucla.edu/documents/areas/fac/hrob/mitchell\\_future\\_labor.pdf](http://www.anderson.ucla.edu/documents/areas/fac/hrob/mitchell_future_labor.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in “AFL-CIO Convention finds labor in need of new friends, new blood,” *The Postal Record*, October 2013, p. 4.