# WHEN DO WORKERS FIRST EXPERIENCE UNIONIZATION? IMPLICATIONS FOR VOICE AND REPRESENTATION IN A NEW WORLD OF WORK

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## ABSTRACT

Workers' first unionized jobs might affect their support for labor unions later in life if attitudes toward unions are formed through these initial experiences. But little is known about when and how workers first experience unionization. By following a cohort of U.S. individuals from their entry into the labor market until age 40, this paper shows that U.S. workers first have unionized jobs early in their working lives with surprising frequency. These results indicate that labor movements should develop life-cycle strategies for providing voice and representation that recognize the young age at which many workers are first unionized.

## INTRODUCTION

Unionized voice and representation has weakened in many countries and sectors. In response, labor unionists, activists, and academics continue to debate the wisdom of union mergers and break-ups, whether unions should be more confrontational or cooperative with employers, and other questions pertaining to enhancing voice and representation. Any strategy is likely to have limited success, however, if it fails to consider how to represent workers throughout the job switches and other major changes that occur over the full life cycle of workers in the new world of work, organizations, and employment (Kochan 2005; Visser 2002).

In many countries, from Asia to Europe to North and South America, workers are most likely to be unionized in their forties (Blanchflower 2007). In the United States, there are more than twice as many union members in their forties than in their twenties. Union leaders that want to be responsive to the majority of their rank and file members consequently negotiate seniority rights, seniority-based wage schedules, and health and retirement benefits that benefit middle-aged and older workers more than younger workers. As a result, "although not generalizable to all unions and countries, in the past, union approaches toward youth may have been best characterized as neglectful or indifferent" (Gallagher 1999: 237). Those interested in the future of collective voice and union representation should be asking whether this middle-aged and older worker bias has contributed to the decline of unions by ignoring how workers experience unionism over the life course.

There is significant research on youth-adult differences in unionization rates (e.g., (Haynes, Vowles, and Boxall 2005) and attitudes (e.g., Bryson et al. 2005), but unfortunately, little is known about when workers have their first unionized job. This paper seeks to remedy this knowledge gap for the United States by tracking 1,500 individuals from when they enter the labor force at age 15 or 16 in 1979 until they reach age 40 or 41 in 2004. These data allow a unique examination of the age at which an individual first becomes unionized and the characteristics of the first unionized job.

## THE DYNAMICS OF INDIVIDUAL UNIONIZATION DECISIONS

Research on why individuals join and leave labor unions underscores the importance of analyzing workers' first experiences with unionized jobs. Thirty years worth of research convincingly demonstrates that individuals with positive attitudes towards unions are significantly more likely to vote in favor of unionizing (Kochan 1979; Deshpande and Fiorito 1989; Park, McHugh, and Bodah 2006). This result is true for both general beliefs about labor unions, and for specific instrumentality beliefs about the perceived effectiveness of a certain union in improving one's wages and working conditions. Some of these attitudes are formed at an early age. In a high school and college student sample with an average age less than 19 years old, Barling, Kelloway, and Bremermann (1991) find that individuals' willingness to join a union are predicted by their attitudes towards them, and these attitudes, in turn, are shaped by parental attitudes. Blanden and Machin (2003) compare young workers with unionized and nonunion fathers and find that the former are twice as likely to be unionized as the latter, and three times more likely if the father is active in their union. This is interpreted as evidence that parental attitudes and experiences with unionization are transmitted to young workers.

Any direct experiences that youths have with unions presumably help shape these important attitudes towards unions, positively or negatively (Gallagher 1999). Gomez and Gunderson (2004) argue that experiencing unionization firsthand is critical for anyone, not just youths, to form accurate beliefs about unionization. Empirical research findings support the importance of these direct experiences for workers generally. Lowe and Rastin's (2000) analyses of high school and college students show that younger workers' work and union experiences are important formative influences on union attitudes. Friedman, Abraham, and Thomas (2006) find that satisfaction with wages and benefits causes unionized individuals to be less likely to express an intent to leave their union. Fullagar et al. (1994) find that early socialization efforts by union leaders towards new union members also positively impact union attitudes and union commitment. But negative experiences also can be important. For example, Waddington (2006) finds that significant numbers of workers leave their unions because the union did not do enough to improve their wages and benefits, union representatives did not contact them, and insufficient help was provided to members. So if younger workers in unionized jobs feel that wage and benefit packages or shop stewards favor middle-aged and older workers, one should expect these younger workers to become dissatisfied, develop negative attitudes towards their unions, and look for jobs elsewhere. These attitudes can have lasting effects—Prowse and Prowse (2006) find that former union members rate unions lower than those that have never been union members.

In conclusion, piecing together important results from the vast research literature on individual determinants of unionization makes a compelling case for hypothesizing that an individual's first experience with on-the-job unionization will shape their views of unionization over the course of their life cycle. The practical importance of this dynamic process for union revitalization depends on when workers first experience unionization. Little is know about these first experiences, however. The remainder of this paper therefore explores when and how U.S. workers are first represented by labor unions

## DATA

To document workers' first encounters with unionization, data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79) are used to construct profiles of individuals' unionization status starting from when they first enter the labor force. The NLSY79 is a nationally-representative sample of individuals who were between the ages of 14 and 22 when they were first surveyed in 1979. The survey was administered to the same individuals every year from 1979 to 1994 and every other year thereafter; data up through the 2004 survey are used here. Only the subset of individuals who were aged 15 or 16 when first surveyed are

retained in this paper in order to be confident that the experiences individuals have with unionization when they first enter the labor force are being fully observed.

Each wave of the NLSY79 asks respondents for information on up to five jobs. Each sampled individual was followed from 1979 to 2004 across all five jobs, and all points at which the individual reported being covered by a collective bargaining agreement were identified. These points are defined as being represented by a union, or "unionized" for short. From this, a series was constructed for each individual indicating for each survey year whether they are unionized. The first instance of ever being unionized captures a worker's first experience with unionization, that is, the individual's first unionized job. Some waves of the NLSY79 did not ask about union membership, so only union coverage is analyzed here, not union membership. Inclusion in the sample does not require being employed in every period, and non-employed individuals are coded as not unionized. The final sample for analysis consists of 1,507 individuals whose unionization status can be consistently tracked through 21 waves of the NLSY79 from age 15 or 16 to age 40 or 41. For summary statistics, see Budd (2008). The NLSY79 intentionally over-samples minorities and low-income households so all of the results are computed using sampling weights.

## WHEN DO U.S. WORKERS FIRST EXPERIENCE UNIONIZATION?

These data allow a unique examination of unionization trends for the first half of workers' life cycles from age 15/16 to 40/41. For starters, consider the fraction of workers who are unionized at each age. As shown by the dashed line in Figure 1, these data echo well-known trends—union density is very low when individuals first start to enter the labor force as teenagers, increases sharply until workers reach their mid-20s, and then stabilizes or perhaps increases slightly until middle age. More importantly, the longitudinal nature of the NLSY79 cohort allows the creation of a unique age/ever-unionized profile that shows the likelihood of ever having been represented by a labor union by a certain age. This profile is shown by the solid line in Figure 1.

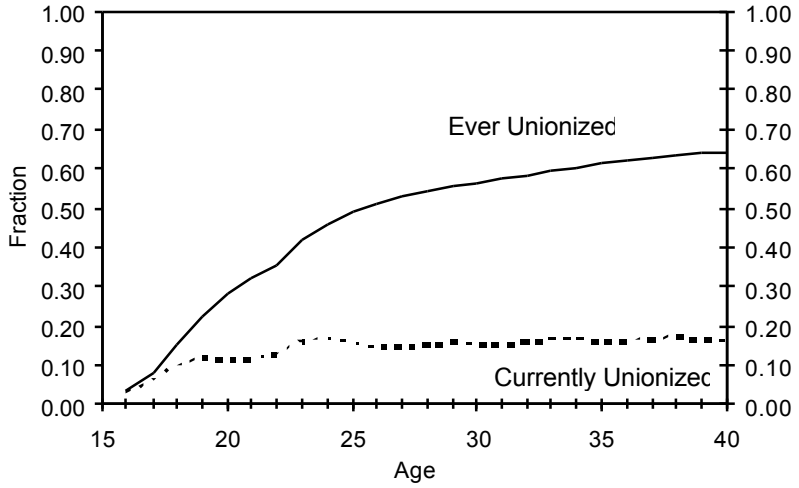


Figure 1: The U.S. Age Profile of Unionization

The power of the age/ever-unionized profile is in showing when workers first encounter unionization in their jobs. The trend in Figure 1 suggests that for U.S. workers, this generally happens at a young age. Specifically, by age 25, 49.3 percent of the sample has had at least one unionized job. The age/ever-unionized profile also rises steeply up to age 25, and then rises more slowly afterwards. Before age 25, the average first-time unionization rate is 5.1 percent per year; for age 25 and older, it is only 1.6 percent annually. These findings provide

an important contrast to the well-established fact that unionization rates are highest for individuals in their forties and fifties. In fact, an individual is much more likely to first experience unionization as a 16-year-old than at any age above 25. Moreover, of those unionized by age 40/41, 76.5 percent first experience unionization by age 25, and nearly 90 percent are first unionized by age 31. One can also consider the sample of workers who are unionized at age 40/41. Of these, the average age when first unionized is 24.57, and 75 percent had their first unionized job by age 27. It is also noteworthy that by age 40, nearly two-thirds of all workers had been unionized at least once during their working lives, and at age 40, ex-unionized workers outnumber currently-represented workers by three to one.

Figure 2 decomposes the age/ever-unionized profile from Figure 1 by gender. The differences in rates of ever-unionization for men and women are statistically significant across all of the ages between 16 and 40. The largest difference (12.8 percentage points) exists at age 23. At this age, 48.1 percent of the men have been unionized, while only 35.3 percent of the women have been. It takes the women an additional five years to reach this level of exposure to unionization, consistent with the fact that younger women stay in school longer, have fewer jobs, and are more likely to work in services and less likely to work in manufacturing and blue collar occupations compared to younger men. This explanation is confirmed by a multivariate regression in which age of first unionization is the dependent variable, and a female dummy variable is not statistically significant if these control variables are added to the model (see Budd 2008).

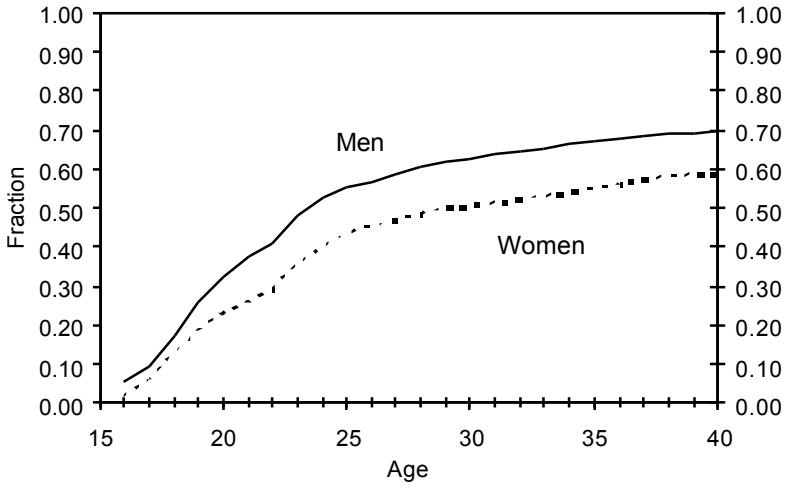


Figure 2: The Age/Ever-Unionized Profile by Gender

Figure 3 reveals life-cycle differences across individuals with different levels of educational attainment. Each category (dropout, high school graduate, some college, and college graduate) indicates the highest level of education that an individual ultimately has at age 40/41, and does not necessarily reflect the education level of the individual at the time s/he became unionized. Note first that the age/ever-unionized profile for individuals who have some college is very similar to that of individuals who are high school graduates. Likewise, a close similarity in ever-unionized rates is uncovered for the least and most educated (college graduates and high school dropouts). Over the life cycle, the differences between the upper trajectory (high school graduates and some college) and the lower one (college graduates and high school dropouts) are quite persistent. It is not until age 40 that the fraction of college graduates and dropouts experiencing unionization reaches the level for high school graduates and some college at age 25. Moreover, these differences emerge at an early age (around age 20). Adult differences in unionization are therefore apparent early in workers' labor market experiences. This further reinforces the importance for the labor movement of understanding workers' early experiences with unionization. Overall, however, it is difficult to

predict the age at which workers first experience unionization—in a regression in which age of first unionization is the dependent variable, many job characteristic variables are insignificant and the adjusted $R^2$ value is only 0.065 (see Budd 2008).

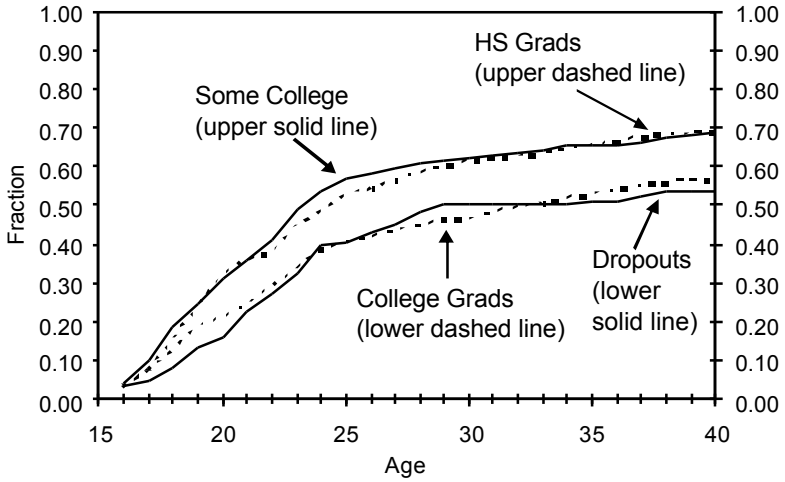


Figure 3: The Age/Ever-Unionized Profile by Final Educational Attainment

One might be concerned that the sample ends at age 40/41. If many workers become unionized for the first time after age 40, then the results presented here overstate the relative frequency of first experiences at younger ages. The convex trajectory of the ever-unionized profile in Figure 1 suggest that this is not the case. By using an exponential model to extrapolate the trend to age 65, it can be estimated that no more than another 2.5 percent of workers are likely to experience unionization for the first time between age 40 and 65.[1] This means that of those workers who are unionized anytime between ages 15 and 65, over 70 percent of them are first unionized by age 25, and 96 percent for the first time by age 40. If a worker has not been unionized by age 40 then it is unlikely that he or she ever will be.

## DOES AN INDIVIDUAL'S FIRST UNIONIZED EXPERIENCE MATTER?

To better understand the nature of individuals' first unionized experiences, the characteristics of the 992 first experiences can also be explored (see Budd 2008 for details). For all workers who were unionized at least once between age 15/16 and 40/41, the average age when first unionized was 23 years old. This statistic again underscores a central result of this paper—first exposure to unionism is a younger worker, not middle-aged or older worker, phenomenon. While this might seem intuitive, it is not a statistic that has previously been documented. At the time of their first unionized job, 27.3 percent of the sample was married, 45.9 percent had a high school diploma, 17.5 percent had completed some college, and 11.6 percent had graduated from college. Over half of the individuals (56.2 percent) had completed their education at the time they first experienced unionization. A vast majority (79.3 percent) lived in an urban area, and only a portion of individuals (27.2 percent) lived in a right-to-work state. On average, each unionized worker had held approximately five jobs prior to their first unionized job. The three industries most represented (out of twelve major industries) were professional and related services, manufacturing, and wholesale and retail trade. These three industries represented a combined total of 66.1 percent of individuals in

[1] A three-parameter exponential model of the form ever-unionized=$\beta_0+\beta_1*\beta_2^{age}$ was estimated using nonlinear least squares. The extrapolation of the ever-unionized trend far beyond the observed sample warrants some caution, but the adjusted $R^2$ value of 0.996 and the resulting narrow confidence bands for the predicted values provide some reassurance for this ambitious extrapolation.

their first unionized jobs. Many of the jobs in which an individual was first unionized were blue-collar occupations (37.8 percent), and 19.4 percent occurred in the public sector.

There are notable differences between those who first experienced unionization at a younger age and those who first experienced it years later. In comparison to their older counterparts, those first unionized before the age of 25 were more likely to be single, not yet have completed their education, and have held fewer previous jobs. These younger workers also were concentrated less heavily in a professional and related services industry or manufacturing; 46.9 percent of those who first experienced unionization before age 20 did so in wholesale and retail trade. They were lower paid, and stayed with their employer for a shorter period of time, and for those first experiencing unionization in their teen years, worked part-time. Workers first unionized at age 30 and beyond were more likely to be college educated and working in professional and related services and the public sector relative to their younger counterparts.

The analyses discussed up to this point clearly show that in general, U.S. workers first encounter unionization at an early age—much earlier than the middle or older ages commonly associated with the existing stock of unionized workers. This result has very important ramifications for revitalizing the labor movement if these early experiences shape workers' preferences for or against union representation in future jobs. The research literature reviewed above shows the importance of individuals' direct experiences with unionization for shaping their attitudes towards unions, and the importance of these attitudes for determining the level of their contemporaneous support for unions. By extending the logic of these results across time, we can hypothesize that workers' direct experiences with unionization early in their working lives will affect the likelihood that they are unionized later in the working lives.

To analyze this question, probit models were estimated using the 690 first unionized jobs that were completed prior to age 30 with dependent variables indicated whether an individual reported being unionized after age 30. Controlling for demographic and labor market experience characteristics, variables from the individual's first unionized job—such as the age of first unionization, industry, occupation, and tenure—are generally not statistically significant, and are only jointly significant at a 10 percent level (see Budd 2008). It should be emphasized, however, that attitudinal measures such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, satisfaction with the union, or union commitment are unavailable. Such measures might reveal stronger connections betweens workers' first unionized jobs and later propensities to be unionized. Investigating the importance of the attitudinal qualities of workers' first experiences with unionization for future labor market outcomes is therefore a valuable subject for future research.

## CONCLUSIONS

The job-centric approach to representing workers embraced by U.S. labor unions for more than 100 years focuses on satisfying workers' needs and desires in the context of specific jobs and/or employers. Majority sentiment in the here and now drives bargaining agendas and the allocation of union resources. Others have recognized that this approach is increasingly poorly matched to the needs of workers who hold many more than jobs than in earlier generations (e.g., Kochan 2005). On average, the nationally-representative sample of individuals analyzed in this paper had nearly 11 jobs by the time they were 40/41 years old. Overlooked, however, is another potential problem—the extent to which favoring the median voter, who is middle-aged or older, creates unfavorable attitudes among younger workers who are experiencing unionism for the first time. This is where the results uncovered in this paper come to the fore—specifically, this paper reveals that workers frequently experience unionism for the first time as younger workers. So if these younger workers are being neglected by their unions, unions run the risk of alienating a larger number of workers than

previously expected.

A solution to both of these potential problems is for labor unions to adopt a life-cycle rather than job-centric representation strategy (Kochan 2005). This might prove hard to develop, however, without some connection that draws workers into the labor movement. The results presented here, therefore, provide some hope for the viability of a life-cycle representation strategy. Nearly 65 percent of the entire cohort studied was unionized in at least one of their jobs by age 40/41. This reveals that U.S. labor unions have an important, and probably overlooked, opportunity to develop a supportive, firsthand relationship with quite a large fraction of the U.S. workforce.

But this will require recognizing that many of these workers' first unionization experiences are at a relatively young age. Among the workers unionized at age 40/41, half were first unionized by age 23, and three-quarters by age 27. Among all of the workers who had at least one unionized job by the time they were 40/41 years old, nearly two-thirds were represented by a union at some point between the ages of 15/16 and 23. This provides a stark contrast to the fact that less than eight percent of all workers covered by a collective bargaining agreement were in this age group. As such, unions need to pay close attention to the extent to which their negotiating agendas and representation strategies favor older rather than younger workers. The results presented here showing that many workers encounter unionization for the first time before age 30 suggest that union strategies toward younger workers might affect longer-term support or opposition to labor unions more than has been recognized. Even if younger workers tolerate different working conditions and join unions for different reasons than older workers (Gallagher 1999), it is hard to believe that workers' first experiences with unionized jobs early in their careers do not have any effect on later attitudes which can then affect how one votes in an NLRB election or whether one supports union-related causes in the socio-political arena. It might also be the case that many young workers are falling into the lap of the U.S. labor movement—statistically it is difficult to explain the age one first encounters unionization so it might be largely a random event. Random or not, the labor movement ignores this golden opportunity at its own peril as educational and organizing efforts directed towards younger workers are likely to pay dividends long into workers' careers (Gomez, Gunderson, and Meltz 2002).

The labor movement admittedly faces significant complexities in fully embracing young workers with the goal of developing lifetime support. Workers who first encounter unionization as teenagers do so disproportionately in wholesale and retail trade which means that specific unions might bear the burden of devoting resources specifically to younger workers. U.S. labor law also favors a job-centric membership model and mandates union democracy. Nevertheless, the labor movement and other interested parties should understand when and how workers first experience unionization, and construct representation strategies that fit with the life cycle realities of today's workers.

The data analyzed in the paper are from the United States, but the implications are broader. Similar lessons are likely to directly apply to other Anglo-American countries with similar industrial relations institutions. Beyond this, in a study of Dutch workers, Visser (2002: 416) finds that "after five years, the joining rate of workers who stay in the same job and have not already joined [the union] drops close to zero." This is broadly similar to a finding in this paper that very few U.S. workers become unionized for the first time beyond age 35. Around the world, then, labor unions might all have a window of opportunity for recruiting workers that does not stay open indefinitely. Designing effective mechanisms of unionized voice and representation in the new world of work would be enhanced by understanding these windows of opportunity.

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