

Introduction to “The Labor Movement and the Dilemma of Direct Confrontation”

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The US labor movement is in crisis. With overall union density in the United States registering a little over 11% and private sector union density under 7% in 2015, it has been a century since US union membership has been this low. Industrial relations scholars, labor commentators, union officials and rank-and-file union activists have made various proposals over the last several years for revitalizing the labor movement. Such suggestions include devoting resources to Alt-labor, that is, nonunion workers’ organizations that have been established to promote employees’ workplace rights; “fortress unionism,” which focuses on bolstering the unions’ core areas of strength; value-added unionism which encourages the development of labor-management cooperation programs; modifying the union organizing process by replacing union certification elections with card-check elections; the implementation of a social movement unionism from below; as well as revitalizing union militancy through reviving the strike. The article published in this issue’s “Perspectives” Section relates to this last proposed methodology for reinvigorating the US labor movement.

In this well-written and interesting “Perspectives” Section article, Ahmed White, Professor of Law at the University of Colorado in Boulder where he teaches and writes about labor law, labor history, and criminal justice, examines what he refers to as “a single, pervasive dilemma” concerning the US unions’ utilization of “confrontational forms of protest” in order to achieve their goals. He contends that the use of tactics such as mass picketing during traditional strikes, plant occupations, and other forms of direct action were historically necessary for the development, growth and survival of labor organizations. When such tactics are utilized, however, he argues that the unions must necessarily deal with the political and legal ramifications which ultimately discourages the use of such approaches. After critically reviewing the history of US labor struggles, White concludes that blindly calling for a return to militancy and the widespread use of strikes as in the 1930s is not the answer. Rather, the US labor movement must successfully confront the legal and political obstacles in its path if it desires to return to a position of strength as in the twentieth century.

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If any of the journal's readers are interested in responding to any essays published in the "Perspectives" Section or would like to write articles on any topics in the field of employee relations, please do not hesitate to contact me with your proposal. I welcome both practitioner-based and scholarly-based articles written from any one of a variety of theoretical perspectives. I hope that you enjoy this article and find it most illuminating.