

“Where I Come From, Women Don’t Sit at the Head of the Table”

Is Embracing DEI Essential to the Resurgence of Unionism?

by

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“In the 1950s about a third of all private workers were in unions.”¹ By comparison, in January 2022 the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that “[i]n 1983... the union membership rate was 20.1 percent and there were 17.7 million union workers. In 2021, the number of ...workers belonging to unions continued to decline to 14.0 million, and the union membership rate was 10.3 percent.”²

After years of decline in union membership, more than two years of COVID-19 and working remotely, and the impact of the Great Resignation, there is cautious optimism about a resurgence of unionism. My personal experience, however, warrants at least a recommendation to proceed mindfully.

I grew up in a union household. My father was a U.S. Steelworker and on staff of the AFL-CIO in Trenton, New Jersey. My mother was a member of the Communications Workers of America.

I respect the labor-management framework. It’s hardwired in my DNA.

Before I became an attorney in 1987, I led a team of labor relations specialists through grievance hearings, labor arbitrations and collective bargaining negotiations. Typically, men represented the unions on the other side of these proceedings. As was my practice when negotiations were held in “my house,” (otherwise known as a management location), I took my place at the head of the conference table.

To my surprise, I was unceremoniously nudged aside by one of the union’s male officers, and told “where I come from, women don’t sit at the head of the table.” Without detailing the particulars of our exchange, I commenced negotiations from my seat at the head of the table. However, the union officer insisted on sitting right next to me instead of at the other end of the table as he would have if I had been a man. In the interest of moving forward with negotiations, I did not object.

The union leader’s misogynistic declaration failed to acknowledge the prominent role that women of different races, ethnicities, ages, religions, and gender identities have played and continue to play in the labor movement. People like Sue Ko Lee of the Chinese Ladies Garment Workers’ Association, Rosina Corrothers Tucker of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, Dolores Fernández Huerta of the National Farm Workers Association, Pauline Newman of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, and others worked vigorously and tirelessly in furtherance of improving the terms and conditions of American workers.

¹ Ileen DeVault, Professor of Labor History at Cornell University’s Industrial and Labor Relations School, quote confirmed on March 9, 2022.

² U.S. Bureau of Bureau of Labor Statistics, Economic News Release, Union Members Summary, January 20, 2022.

Today, people like Michele A. Roberts of the National Basketball Players Association and Randi Weingarten of the American Federation of Teachers are prominent union officials. They are exceptionally effective labor advocates. Still, they, and others like them, are neither traditional nor typical leaders in the labor movement.

A review of potential sources of new union members is worthwhile. Significantly, in 2021 the number of female-identifying union members declined by 182,000 to 6.5 million workers. Following a historic trend, at 11.5 percent, Black workers had a higher union membership rate than White workers at 10.03 percent, Hispanic workers at 9.0 percent, and Asian workers at 7.7 percent.

Union membership rates declined by 0.4 percent for White workers, by 0.8 percent for Black workers, by 0.8 percent for Hispanic workers, and by 1.2 percent for Asian workers. The 2021 rates for Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics are little or no different from 2019, while the rate for Asians is lower.³

Age is also an important demographic. Workers aged 45 to 54 had the highest union membership rate in 2021, at 13.1 percent. Younger workers between the ages of 16 and 24 had the lowest union membership rate, at 4.2 percent.⁴

Admittedly, organized labor is now more diverse and broadly based than in the 1950s or before I became an attorney. In 2018, of the 14.7 million wage and salary workers who belonged to a union, 25 percent were female-identifying, and 28 percent were Black.⁵

Whether unionism will resurge or simply sputter, there is union activity in interesting and surprising areas. Congressional staffers have begun an organization drive toward unionism.⁶ Starbucks employees in Oxford, Mississippi, and reportedly in more than 100 stores nationally have made moves toward becoming unionized.⁷ Apple Store employees are also “quietly” exploring whether to unionize.⁸

However, if there is to be a sustainable resurgence of unionism, more than lip service will be needed to embrace all those who seek to move forward to bargain collectively regardless of backgrounds, opinions, and interests. Intentionally and authentically embracing diversity, equity, and inclusion holistically is essential to revitalize the labor movement. Quite simply, there is strength in numbers.

The male labor leader who objected to a woman sitting at the head of the table has passed on. Unfortunately, he did not live long enough to learn that President Joseph R. Biden named Lauren McFerran chair of the National Labor Relations Board.

³ Id.

⁴ Id.

⁵ History.com Editors, History, last updated September 1, 2020, originally published October 29, 2009. <https://www.history.com/topics/19th-century/labor>

⁶ Rebecca Shabad, *Congressional staffers announce effort to unionize on Capitol Hill*, THE HILL, Feb. 4, 2022.

⁷ Sara DiNatale, *Mississippi Starbucks Workers Want a Union in Oxford*, MISSISSIPPI TODAY, Emmerich News, Mar. 7, 2022.

⁸ Reed Albergotti, *Some U.S. Apple Store employees are working to unionize, part of a growing worker backlash*, THE WASHINGTON POST, Feb. 18, 2022.