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Richard W. Hurd

Cornell University, rwh8@cornell.edu

Tashlin Lakhani

Cornell University

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Unions, Associations and Twenty-First Century Professionals

Abstract

[Excerpt] Unions that represent professional and technical workers are at a critical juncture in their evolution. On the one hand, there is tremendous opportunity; disproportionate employment growth can be expected for professional and technical occupations in health care, education, science and technology, performing arts, media and communication. On the other hand, there are clear challenges. Professional labor markets and the contemporary workplace are being reconfigured by neoliberal economic policies, technological change, and the spread of contingent employment arrangements. Twenty-first century professional workers will respond positively to unions only if they see organizations that are agile enough to adapt to the workers' own shifting concerns.

Keywords

professional workers, technical workers, unions, labor movement

Comments

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Unions, Associations and Twenty-First Century Professionals



Report by Richard W. Hurd and Tashlin Lakhani

**Unions, Associations and Twenty-First Century
Professionals**

Richard W. Hurd

Professor of Labor Studies, Cornell University

and

Tashlin Lakhani

Eleanor Emerson Fellow

School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Cornell University

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Unions, Associations and Twenty-First Century Professionals

Unions that represent professional and technical workers are at a critical juncture in their evolution. On the one hand, there is tremendous opportunity; disproportionate employment growth can be expected for professional and technical occupations in health care, education, science and technology, performing arts, media and communication. On the other hand, there are clear challenges. Professional labor markets and the contemporary workplace are being reconfigured by neoliberal economic policies, technological change, and the spread of contingent employment arrangements. Twenty-first century professional workers will respond positively to unions only if they see organizations that are agile enough to adapt to the workers' own shifting concerns.

Market demand for professional and technical workers is growing steadily. In the U.S., employment is expected to grow faster in professional and related occupations than in other major occupational groups. The U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics projects a 16.7% increase in professional and technical employment for the ten year period between 2006 and 2016. This is well above the anticipated increase in total U.S. employment of 10.4% over the same period (*Monthly Labor Review*, 2007). White collar workers now make up a greater proportion of the labor force than ever before, 76.8% in 2007 (BLS, 2007).

Although job expansion is impressive, changes in control structures and corporate hierarchies are combining with rapid advances in information technology to create intense pressure in labor markets for many professional and technical occupations. Employers are increasing efforts to monitor job content while workers experience heightened anxiety about potential obsolescence. At the same time, government neoliberal economic policies allow for greater influence by unrestrained market forces. In this context, professional and technical workers are losing the ability to exercise discretion and to influence the content of the jobs they perform; simultaneously, they see job security threatened by the rise of contingent work, contract labor, and telecommuting.

The combination of employment growth, technological advances and alterations in the functioning of white collar markets substantiates the need for unions to consider strategic reconceptualization and institutional transformation. But what exactly needs to be done? Can unions construct new models of representation that offer professional and technical workers a voice on the job as well as leverage in the labor market?

Employee Organizations: *What do workers want?*

Three comprehensive attitudinal surveys of professional and technical workers in the U.S. reveal a pattern of attitudes that differs notably from those that unions encounter when organizing and representing blue collar and service workers.¹ Professional and technical workers exhibit relatively high levels of job satisfaction and are strongly attached to their jobs. Nevertheless, a strong majority voice support for joining an organization to address job-related concerns. The type of organization they prefer is one with strong occupational identity that places priority on professional issues. Most workers want an organization that functions cooperatively with management, and one that places priority on professional development and quality of service rather than on working conditions, salaries, and benefits. When given a choice between a professional association and a union, the preference is consistently for an association (by a two-to-one margin for most groups).

These overall results are reinforced by analysis of more detailed questions related to work, employee voice, and employee organizations. In the survey conducted by Cornell University for the AFL-CIO Department of Professional Employees (DPE), participants were questioned on the type of employee organization most likely to attract their support: a union, a non-union workplace association, an employee involvement committee, a professional association or no

¹ This includes a study conducted by Peter Hart Research for the AFL-CIO Department for Professional Employees in 2005 that surveyed three groups of workers (nurses, university faculty, and information technology professionals) regarding attitudes toward professional organizations. The responses to that survey are consistent with a 2000 survey of four groups of professionals conducted by Peter Hart for the Shanker Institute and a 1998 survey of seven groups of professionals conducted by Cornell University for the DPE and reported in Hurd and Bunge (2005).

organization. Among the two-thirds of those surveyed who chose a union or a professional association, there were some interesting subtexts. Almost all of those who selected union as their first choice also expressed support for professional associations. In contrast, among those who chose professional associations as their first choice, less than half were favorable towards unions.

Those who indicated a preference for unions were significantly more likely to express concerns over compensation, working conditions and job security; these workers also saw management in a relatively negative light, preferred aggressive action to resolve workplace issues and generally showed concern for fair treatment in the workplace. In contrast, those who indicated a preference for professional associations were significantly more likely to express interest in professional development and other occupational matters; they identified control over decisions and the ability to freely exercise professional judgment as their primary workplace concerns, and preferred to approach workplace issues in a cooperative manner with their employer (Hurd and Bunge, 2005).

Perhaps most relevant to contemporary labor strategists, the consistent message of the survey data is that unions can win majority support among groups of professional and technical workers only by appealing to those who identify more closely with professional associations than with traditional adversarial labor unions. In this context, all of the survey results fit the contrasting styles of professional associations and unions. Although both types of organization act as advocates for the members of the profession, unions address workplace issues whereas associations focus almost exclusively on professional concerns. Unions provide representation services to members in their relationship with employers. Associations foster collegial relations both within the profession and with employers. Professionals are drawn to associations because of information, professional development and networking. They are often drawn to unions because of problems on the job. Associations offer knowledge and professional expertise whereas unions offer bargaining power.

When one takes into account the traditional functions of these respective employee organizations and the needs and interests of professional employees, it

should not be surprising that professional workers prefer associations over unions. Similarly, it is no accident that during this era of persistent union decline, many professional associations have been experiencing tremendous growth (see Appendix #1). It seems clear that unions should consider seriously the option of altering their character and institutional role to match the desires of potential members. If they do this and begin to develop new initiatives, unions stand to benefit from a deeper appreciation of the strategies and practices of successful professional organizations. There is a natural tendency for labor activists to distrust organizations that call themselves associations and that proclaim a desire to work cooperatively with employers. Perhaps the time has come to reevaluate this distrust.

Successful Professional Associations: *What are they doing?*

Two aspects of professional association strategies and practice are noteworthy: the services they offer to their members and their practices for membership recruitment and retention. Professional associations essentially establish identity and dignity for the profession by setting minimum educational requirements, national certification standards and a code of ethics that outlines the expectations of professional behavior for members of that profession. They engage in political activity to influence state licensure requirements and scope of practice regulations. Associations also provide mechanisms for members to advance knowledge, disseminate information and network with their peers.

Education is at the core of the purpose and operation of professional associations. Educational requirements help to elevate and differentiate the profession. Continuing education reinforces knowledge while simultaneously ensuring the continued proprietorship of specialized expertise that is essential in order to retain professional status. Education provided by associations takes many forms, ranging from publications and conferences to formal partnerships with colleges and universities.

Given the increasing challenges facing white collar workers, many associations are expanding the labor market services they provide. This is especially true for labor market services related to job search, and includes

employment listings on association web sites, salary profiles of members in specific geographic areas and subspecialties, and career counseling programs.

Professional association recruitment and retention strategies are developed within the framework of the organization's role within the profession. They are tied to meeting members' needs for information and continuing education and their desire for networking opportunities. Since all associations operate in what is comparable to what unions consider an "open shop" environment, they develop elaborate systems to connect with members. They track members of the profession, communicate with them regularly, survey them regarding occupational needs and engage them in the association's activities. Most associations develop a network of chapters at the state and local level and engage the chapters directly in recruitment and retention activities. Many associations have active university-based initiatives to reach out to students pursuing degrees required for entry into the profession. Some associations even engage in recruitment at the high school level, especially for professions experiencing labor market shortages. With the rapid progress of globalization, international membership recruitment is rapidly becoming the norm in some fields. This is most evident in business and engineering professions.

Conclusions & Recommendations:

What can unions learn from professional associations?

Overall, it is clear that professional associations are undertaking a number of activities to ensure their present and future success. Indeed, the viability of their strategies to date is reflected in the unprecedented growth of some of these associations (see Appendix 1). Ultimately, it appears that the secret of these thriving professional associations is their continued ability to adapt strategies and practices to the changing needs of workers.

Based on the U.S. surveys (and confirmed by low union density in most countries among private sector professional and technical workers), it seems unlikely that unions will attract a groundswell of interest among white collar workers simply by appealing to latent demand for traditional union representation. Achieving majority support among specific groups of professional workers will depend on a union's ability to attract those who do want a voice at work, but whose preferences are otherwise more closely aligned with the package of services offered by professional associations. This implies more attention to professional and occupational issues both on the job and in the broader labor market, initiatives to provide access to professional development opportunities, and perhaps a modified demeanor vis-à-vis employers.

Alternatively, unions may have more success if they build minority unions or consider alternative structures. One question that must be considered is whether there are models that would draw upon unions' comparative advantage in addressing workplace concerns, but operate outside of a traditional collective bargaining framework. The provision of labor market services such as job search assistance and portable benefits could be part of a new form of unionism akin to traditional guilds.

Professional development programs are key to the success of professional associations, but can they also form the basis for unions to attract individual workers? This certainly deserves careful attention, as does the alternative of forming alliances with established professional associations already skilled in the continuing

education arena. Unionists also should carefully consider the details of the recruitment practices of successful associations who are masters at identifying and communicating with prospective members.

As global labor movements continue to struggle in the face of declining private sector density, unions of professional and technical workers are in a position to make a difference. There is a natural tension between the growth in professional and technical employment and the deprofessionalization of the work, exacerbated by threats to job security. These tensions provide an opportunity for unions to grow, but that will require strategic innovation and organizational transformation.

An in-depth strategic review of the operation of professional associations by key union leaders and high-level staff would be an appropriate step in developing new approaches that could attract significant numbers of new members. The following options are among those that should be considered:

- ⇒ The continued performance of those activities that provide workers with a voice in the workplace in conjunction with the provision of a package of services more closely aligned with those offered by professional associations.
- ⇒ Cooperative relationships with management as opposed to the adversarial relations based on differences in bargaining power that unions typically embrace.
- ⇒ Greater focus on professional and occupational issues as opposed to the traditional “bread and butter” issues of wages and benefits.
- ⇒ Possible partnerships and alliances with professional associations already skilled in providing particular services, such as continuing education and labor market information and assistance.
- ⇒ Participation in and/or affiliations with state licensing agencies and regulatory boards as well as university programs offering relevant professional degrees.
- ⇒ Adoption of the “best practices” of successful professional associations both with regards to the services these organizations offer their

members and the strategies and tactics these organizations utilize to attract and keep members.

⇒ The adoption of alternative structures that allow unions to better serve the needs and interests of white collar workers. An example of this could be union structures which transcend the boundaries of a single workplace and operate on a more purely occupational basis. Structures such as this are especially relevant in light of employee desires for professional development and networking as well as the contemporary precariousness of job security among professional and related workers.

A strategic assessment of the options that appear viable based on the professional association model will certainly focus on whether the possible modifications have the potential to result in substantial membership growth. In this context, it is certainly advisable to proceed with a degree of caution given that association priorities and modes of operation are not always in tune with the basic values of organized labor. Recognizing this, a group of unions affiliated with the AFL-CIO Department for Professional Employees has in fact initiated a formal dialogue with a dozen large U.S. based professional associations to exchange information and explore opportunities to establish formal partnerships.

With the expansion of professional and technical employment and the changing character of professional work, unions that organize and represent professional workers are in a critical position. The time is ripe for a broadened labor appeal to highly educated workers in the private sector, and innovative approaches that borrow selectively from the professional association model have the potential to fuel union growth. Resistance to transformation is no excuse to bypass this opportunity to reinvent our unions in order to pave the way to the future.

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Appendix 1

SELECTED PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS MEMBERSHIP GROWTH, 1998-2008

	MEMBERSHIP			% Change (Associations Unlimited)	CPS Estimated 10 Year Growth in Employment in Relevant Occupation ³
	Associations Unlimited ²		Association Website		
	1998	2008	2008		
Institute of Electronics and Electrical Engineering	274000	370000	370000	35.04%	7.4%
American Institute of Architects	56000	77000	80000	37.50%	31.5%
Oncology Nursing Society	25000	35000	35000	40.00%	[25.0%]
American Speech-Language-Hearing Association	87000	123000	122762	41.38%	35.7%
American Academy of Physicians Assistants	25100	37000	41599	47.41%	10.3%
American Medical Technologists	25000	38000	41000	52.00%	[25.0%]
American College of Radiology	20000	32000	32000	60.00%	[25.0%]
Golf Course Superintendents Association of America	12000	21000	n.a.	75.00%	n.a.
Institute of Internal Auditors	51000	90000	150000	76.47%	11.3%
American Massage Therapy Association	28000	55000	56000	96.43%	[40.0%]
American Society of Radiologic Technologists	50000	120000	120000	140.00%	[30.0%]
Associated Bodywork and Massage Professionals	23000	57000	57000	147.83%	[40.0%]
International Society for Pharmaceutical Engineering	9100	23000	25000	152.75%	n.a.
Project Management Institute	25000	100000	240000	300.00%	n.a.

² According to Associations Unlimited, "this figure represents individuals, firms, institutions, other associations, or a combination of these categories. Since membership constantly fluctuates, the figure listed should be considered an approximation".

³ Percents that are in brackets are for a broad group of similar occupations.

Member Recruitment Strategies of Selected High Growth Associations

AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS⁴

- Eight years ago membership stagnant
- Increased attention to membership at strategic level
- Needs satisfaction surveys
- Segmented message to members
 - New architects, new firms—business education
 - Established firms—continuing professional education
- Strengthened chapters to connect with members
- Renewed growth (28.6% in five years)

AMERICAN SOCIETY OF RADIOLOGIC TECHNOLOGISTS⁵

- Close affiliation with national certifying body (American Registry of Radiologic Technologists)
- Rapid growth tied to ARRT mandate for continuing education to retain certification
- ASRT delivers education, tracks credits of individuals, and automatically informs ARRT
- National level political program to set minimum federal standards for certification
- Wage and salary surveys inform members regarding what they should expect
- Job Satisfaction surveys
- Increased attention to specialized, limited function X-ray technicians
- Active recruitment for the profession

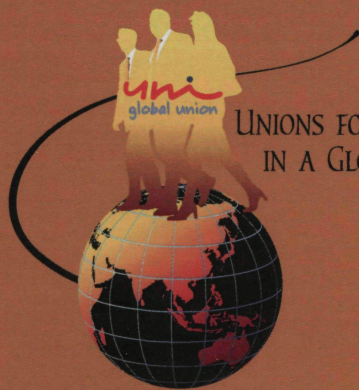
INSTITUTE OF INTERNAL AUDITORS⁶

- Rapid growth in wake of corporate scandals (WorldCom, Enron)—45.5% in five years
- Long-term expansion tied to international membership; chapters in 165 countries
- Initiative to enhance global leadership in the profession
- Member needs surveys
- Enhanced capability to profile members, identify specific needs/interests
- Improved electronic communication program
- On-going, formal, comprehensive, strategic planning process

⁴ Based on interviews with Carol Madden, AIA Managing Director of Member Services, and material available at www.aia.org.

⁵ Based on interviews with DuVonne Campbell, ASRT Vice President for Member Services, and Dick Harris, ASRT Director of Research, and on material available at www.asrt.org.

⁶ Based on interview with Judy Burke, IIA Director of Membership Development, and material available at www.theiaa.org.



UNIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS
IN A GLOBAL ECONOMY

UNI Global Union

Ave. Reverdil 8-10

1260 Nyon

Switzerland

Tel: +41 22 365 21 00

Fax: +41 22 365 21 21

Email: contact@uniglobalunion.org

Web: www.uniglobalunion.org

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