

WHEN DO U.S. WORKERS FIRST EXPERIENCE UNIONIZATION?
IMPLICATIONS FOR REVITALIZING THE LABOR MOVEMENT

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Abstract

Debates over revitalizing the U.S. labor movement often overlook when workers are first unionized. This paper analyzes the frequency and nature of workers' first unionized jobs by tracking a cohort of individuals from age 15/16 to 40/41. Though workers are most likely to be unionized when they are in their forties, this paper shows that surprising numbers of individuals first encounter unionization in their jobs at a much younger age. These results highlight the importance of experiential union membership models as well as life-cycle union representation strategies that recognize the young age at which many workers are first unionized.

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After decades of decline, labor unionists and interested observers are engaged in wide-ranging debates over the U.S. labor movement's revitalization, as punctuated by the breakaway from the AFL-CIO of seven key unions and the formation of Change to Win in 2005. Some of these debates question the core strategies of U.S. labor unions, including the job-centric membership model that dates back to the Gompers-era AFL craft unions of more than one hundred years ago. In this pure-and-simple or business unionism approach, labor unions focus on representing unionized workers in specific jobs, not the working class generally. Union leaders try to recruit new members and keep existing members satisfied by emphasizing the gains they bring to workers in their current jobs. Champions of a broader-based social movement unionism have attacked the conservatism of this approach that fails to generate solidarity with nonunion workers and other social movement groups (Clawson 2003; Fantasia and Voss 2004). An overemphasis on narrow economic issues can also weaken union vitality by reducing union members to passive dues-paying recipients of union services (de Turberville 2004; Snape and Redman 2004). Such critiques, however, tend to overshadow another concern with job-centric unionism—it fails to consider the appropriate strategy for representing workers throughout the job switches and other major changes that occur over the full life cycle of today's workers (Kochan 2005; Visser 2002).

Under job-centric membership unionism, insiders (union members) are more important than outsiders (potential union members). Among the insiders, the difficulties in reconciling the interests of different segments are well-known (Ross 1948), but a simple model with democratic decision-making implies that union-negotiated terms and conditions of employment will reflect the preferences of the median or average union member (Kaufman 2002). The median age of U.S. union members is 45 years, and there are more than twice as many union members in their

forties than in their twenties.¹ Union leaders who want to be responsive to the majority of their rank and file members consequently negotiate seniority rights, seniority-based wage schedules, defined-benefit pension plans, health insurance coverage for retirees or dependents, and other terms and conditions of employment 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).

The debates over how to revitalize the U.S. labor movement largely fail to question whether this favoring of middle-aged and older workers optimizes an individual’s experiences with unionization over the course of his or her working life. The dominant job-centric membership model might maximize the well-being of a majority of the current union members when they are a certain age, but those interested in revitalizing the labor movement should be asking what type of organizing and membership model maximizes and maintains union membership and support from the start of the 50 or so years each individual will work in their lifetime. Taking seriously the role of younger workers in union revitalization efforts requires recognizing when workers are first unionized and how these early experiences affect later attitudes toward labor unions (Lowe and Rastin 2000).

These are largely previously-unexplored issues. Some research compares the unionization rates and attitudes towards unionization between younger and older workers (e.g., Bryson et al. 2005), but we know very little about when workers are represented by a union for the first time in their working lives, the nature of these first experiences, and whether they matter for later

¹ Calculated from the month 8 outgoing rotation groups of the 2007 Current Population Survey. Workers in their 40s are also more likely to be unionized than workers in their 20s—specifically, the proportion of workers in their 20s who are unionized is 0.076 compared to 0.138 for workers in their 40s. Also see Blanchflower (2007).

labor market outcomes.² This paper seeks to start remedying this gap in our knowledge by analyzing data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979. By tracking individuals from age 15 or 16 in 1979 to age 40 or 41 in 2004, some striking statistics are uncovered. For the cohort of U.S. individuals who had been represented by a union by the time they were around 40 years old in 2004, over half were first represented before age 23, and more than 85 percent were first represented before they were 30 years old. These unique results are important for a fuller understanding of how workers experience unionization, and contain important lessons for unions as they struggle to increase their membership ranks in the 21st century.

Associate Membership, Union Summer, and Other Initiatives

The U.S. labor movement has not ignored nonunion workers, former union members, or youths. In the 1980s, the AFL-CIO launched an associate membership program in which nonunion workers, including formerly unionized workers, could join the AFL-CIO for an annual fee and gain access to credit cards, discounted insurance plans, legal services, and other benefits through Union Privilege (Jarley and Fiorito 1990). In 2003, the AFL-CIO created Working America as another attempt to reach out to nonunion workers and their families. Registration is free and members receive e-mail alerts on topics such as health care, social security, and living wages. Members have access to the Union Privilege consumer benefits, but the main thrust is political—the Working America website gives members the opportunity to shape the AFL-CIO’s legislative priorities, and Working America tries to enlist its two million members in contacting legislators and engaging in community organizing activities.

² Clark et al. (1993) and Fullagar et al. (1994) analyze the socialization of workers joining a specific union for the first time, but these are not necessarily these workers’ first unionized jobs. Closer to the present study is Lowe and Rastin’s (2000) analyses of the formation of union attitudes and the influence of early union membership among Canadian high school and college students. This previous research complements the analyses developed here, but the point remains that very little is known about workers’ first unionized jobs.

With respect to younger workers specifically, the AFL-CIO created a Union Summer program in 1996 in which college students or recent college graduates spend 10 weeks engaging in various workers' rights campaigns. In 2007, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) created a nonprofit organization, Qvisory Tools for Life, to provide information, services, and online networking through qvisory.org on issues pertaining to jobs and money specifically for workers aged 18 to 34. This initiative explicitly recognizes the life cycle dynamics of younger workers—in the words of SEIU President Andy Stern, “we’re living in a world where 18-to-34-year olds have 9 to 12 jobs by the time they’re 35. This new effort is seeking to be a safety net for these young people as they move from job to job” (Greenhouse 2007: A18). One United Food and Commercial Workers local has created youth representatives to build relationships with the young workers in that local (Johnson and Jarley 2005).

While the Union Summer program has increased activism among college students (Van Dyke, Dixon, and Carlon 2007), it does not engage them as workers and it ignores younger workers without a college education (Kuriga 2006). The Qvisory initiative intentionally steers clear of on-the-job representational issues, and is instead intended as a place to which the SEIU can refer younger workers who need financial advice so that the SEIU can focus on collective bargaining for its unionized employees (Greenhouse 2007). There is consequently still a need for the labor movement to consider what the life-cycle labor market experience of today’s workers implies about the best model for revitalizing the labor movement.

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 confirms the intuitively obvious prediction 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 (also see Blanden and Machin 2003).

Any direct experiences that youths have with unions presumably help shape these important attitudes towards unions, positively or negatively (Gallagher 1999). Bryson and Gomez (2003) and 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. Clark et al. (1993) and 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.

Individual decisions to unionize therefore occur as a dynamic process with individuals encountering unions at various points in their working lives, and shaped by various influences over time. It would be going too far to say that if unions do not organize younger workers by a certain age then they never will. But 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.” Moreover, workers who quit their union are most likely to do so early on. These are not necessarily younger workers, and this is a very different institutional context from the United States, but the results provocatively suggest that unions have a window of opportunity for recruiting workers that does not stay open indefinitely.

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 known about these first experiences, however. The remainder of this paper therefore analyzes when 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 (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2005). 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 all of their unionized jobs are being observed.³ Inclusion in the sample does not require being employed.

Each wave of the NLSY79 asks respondents for information on up to five jobs held since the previous interview. 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 had ever been unionized. The first instance of ever being unionized captures a worker’s first experience with unionization, that is, the individual’s first unionized job. Information on union membership is not consistently asked in each wave so the focus here is on collective bargaining coverage rather than union membership. The final sample for analysis consists of 1,507 individuals whose unionization status can be consistently tracked from age 15 or 16 to age 40 or 41.⁴ To provide a sense of the data, Table 1 provides summary statistics of the

³ The unionization rate for 14 and 15 year olds in 1979 is only half a percent, compared to a rate of 5-10 percent for 17 and 18 year olds. The possibility of missing pre-survey unionized jobs is therefore nontrivial for those over the age of 16. Fourteen year olds are excluded because they represent a significantly smaller group in comparison to 15 and 16 year olds. Limiting the sample to 15 and 16 year olds results in balanced cohort sizes. Also, some waves of the NLSY79 occur in different months so not everyone ages one year in the reported data. In the final data set, everyone is recoded to age one year for each survey year based on their age in the initial survey.

⁴ Of the 3,130 individuals in the NLSY79 who were aged 15 or 16 in 1979, 1,534 were excluded from the analyses in this paper because they did not participate in one or more of the survey

variables used in the analyses. Again, for all 1,507 individuals, there are 21 waves of data spanning 26 years starting at age 15/16. Only the first and last waves are summarized in Table 1 for brevity.⁵ These data allow a unique examination of unionization trends for the first half of workers' life cycles from age 15/16 to 40/41.

Unionization Rates Over the Life Cycle to Age 40/41

Table 2 reports the age-by-age average rates for five different measures of unionization for ages 16 to 40 (see also Figure 1).⁶ Column 1 reports the usual union density measure—the fraction of workers covered by a union contract when surveyed—and the results echo well-known trends. Specifically, 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. The unique longitudinal nature of the NLSY79 cohort reveals important new results in the remaining columns. Column 2 shows the fraction of individuals in this cohort who once were unionized but are not still unionized at an older age. By age 20, more than 15 percent of individuals are no longer unionized; by age 30 this fraction

waves. A 1994 survey error resulted in numerous respondents not being asked whether or not they were covered by a collective bargaining agreement. Where possible, information reported for other variables was used to impute the missing union status variable—89 of these individuals reported being self-employed and were thus coded as not covered, another 487 were able to be matched based on their employer id to a previous or subsequent year in which the value for their covered status provided in that year was utilized, 26 individuals were matched in a similar fashion using industry and occupation codes, and 19 individuals were coded as not covered because of job tenure of a month or less. Eighty-nine individuals were dropped because of an inability to confidently impute missing information.

⁵ The NLSY79 intentionally over-samples minorities and low-income households. All of the results are therefore computed using sampling weights.

⁶ Ages 15 and 41 are excluded from Table 2 and the figures because these ages are present in only half of the sample. Additionally, because the survey is only given every other year after 1994, each age between 31 and 41 is sampled only once, not twice. The fractions reported in Table 2 and the figures are therefore smoothed by interpolating the missing values as weighted averages of the previous and subsequent values within each cohort (for example, for the 15 year old cohort, the value for age 33 is interpolated from ages 32 and 34 before being averaged with the age 33 value from the 16 year old cohort).

jumps to over 40 percent, and approaches 50 percent around age 40. In other words, by the time these workers approach middle age, there are three times more ex-unionized workers than currently-unionized workers. When one combines those who are currently unionized and once were unionized, nearly two-thirds of this cohort of individuals was unionized in at least one job by age 40/41 (column 3).

In other words, nearly two-thirds experience unionization firsthand at some point in the first half of their careers. This result stands in stark contrast to popular notions of unionization as increasingly irrelevant in today's employment relationship. U.S. union density has been declining for some time and is now less than 15 percent. But this oft-cited density rate of less than 15 percent misses the fact that a majority of U.S. workers are unionized at some point. Across the life cycle, then, labor unions represent many more workers than is suggested by the conventional union density trends.

When Are U.S. Workers First Unionized?

But when do workers first encounter unionization in their jobs? The ever-unionized trend in Figure 1 suggests that this generally happens at a young age, and column 3 of Table 2 shows that by age 25, 49.3 percent of the sample has had at least one unionized job. To see when these first experiences occur, column 4 shows the age-by-age first unionization rates. The most likely ages to first have a unionized job are 18, 19, and 23. 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.

Column 5 reports the age-by-age first unionization rates for the 992 individuals that are unionized at some point between age 15/16 and 40/41. Of those unionized by age 40/41, 76.5 percent first experience unionization by age 25, nearly 90 percent are first unionized by age 31, and the average age when first unionized is 23 years old.⁷ While it might seem intuitive that first exposure to unionism is a younger worker, not middle-aged or older worker, phenomenon, these statistics have not been previously 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 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. Also, there are notable differences between those who first experienced unionization at a younger age and those who first experienced it years later (results available upon request).

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 trajectory of the ever-unionized profile in

⁷ 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.

Figure 1 and column 3 of Table 2 suggest that this is not the case. By using an exponential model to extrapolate the trend in column 3 out 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 65.⁸ 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.

The First Unionization Experience

Figure 2 decomposes the age/ever-unionized profile from Figure 1 by gender and education level. Each curve reveals the likelihood of having experienced unionization by a specific age by showing the age-by-age fraction of the individuals in the sample who are or were covered by a collective bargaining agreement and therefore represented by a labor union. The differences in rates of ever-unionization for men and women are statistically significant across all of the ages between 16 and 40 (Figure 2a). The largest difference (12.8 percentage points) exists at age 23. At this age, 48.1 percent of the men 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. These explanations are formalized below when the multivariate results from Table 3 are presented.

⁸ A three-parameter exponential model of the form $\text{ever-unionized} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 * \beta_2^{\text{age}}$ 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 indicates that this model closely fits the data, and resulting narrow confidence intervals provide some reassurance for this ambitious extrapolation (e.g., 0.665 ± 0.015 at age 65).

Figure 2b 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.

Table 3 further explores the determinants of the age of one's unionized job by reporting the results of ordinary least squares regressions to predict the age at which the individual first experiences unionization. These results use the 991 individuals who were unionized by age 40/41 and who have complete data. The results in Table 3 should be interpreted exclusively as a description of the patterns in the data among those who unionized before age 40, and not as a causal analysis, because unlike a hazard rate analysis, ordinary least squares regressions do not properly account for the temporal pattern of events.

Turning to the results, the differences between men and women, and between the some college and college graduate categories in the respective age trajectories uncovered in Figure 2 are reflected in column 1 of Table 3. Column 2 adds each individual's demographic, labor market, and job history characteristics between age 15/16 and 40/41 to the regression. The female and education coefficients lose statistical significance which implies that these factors are related to other determinants of the age of first exposure. In other words, the labor market experience of workers between age 15/16 and 40/41 exhibits a stronger influence than demographic characteristics on the age of first exposure. Individuals who worked a larger proportion of time in professional and related services, or to a lesser extent in the public sector, first experience unionization at a later age relative to those spending more time in other industries or sectors. Individuals who spent a greater proportion of time not working during the sample period encounter unionization at a later age.

The relationship between average wages and age of first unionization is curvilinear. The inflection point is around \$22 per hour (about the 90th percentile). Up to this point, increases in average hourly earnings across an individual's labor market experience decrease the predicted age of first unionization; among those who earn more than \$22 per hour on average between age 15/16 and 40/41, higher earning workers have their first unionized job at a later age. In other words, for all but the highest-earning individuals, better-paid employees first experience unionization at a younger age. Finally, note that the R^2 value is only 0.065 which implies that observed demographic characteristics and labor market experiences account for only a very small fraction of the variability in the age of first unionization.

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 in earlier generations (Kochan 2005; Stone 2004). 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: 151) explains how this can work:

Once recruited, the relationship with members could be maintained for life by providing the labor market and educational services and benefits individuals and families need as they move through different stages of their careers and family lives. Consistent with the history of the way many unions began, these types of organizations might serve as mutual benefit societies by providing workers with health insurance, savings programs that build retirement security, life-long education, work-family supports, and the social networks and information needed to find jobs when required. They would also provide quick and effective advice and representation to solve problems and if necessary represent workers in trouble, individually and collectively.

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 27.⁹ 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.¹⁰ As such, unions need to pay close attention to the extent to which their negotiating agendas, representation strategies, and outreach efforts 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 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—the regression model in Table 3 only accounts for 6.5 percent of the overall variation in the age of first unionization so absent better explanatory variables, there is a large random component to when workers first encounter unionization. Random or not, the labor movement ignores this

⁹ Admittedly, these results are from a very specific cohort of workers so the specific percentages might vary from cohort to cohort, but there is little reason to believe that the general patterns uncovered here do not generalize more broadly.

¹⁰ Calculated from the Current Population Survey for 1983 and 1986.

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. Even when these unions realize the importance of workers' first unionized experiences, high turnover of younger workers can make it difficult to build strong connections (Johnson and Jarley 2005). 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.

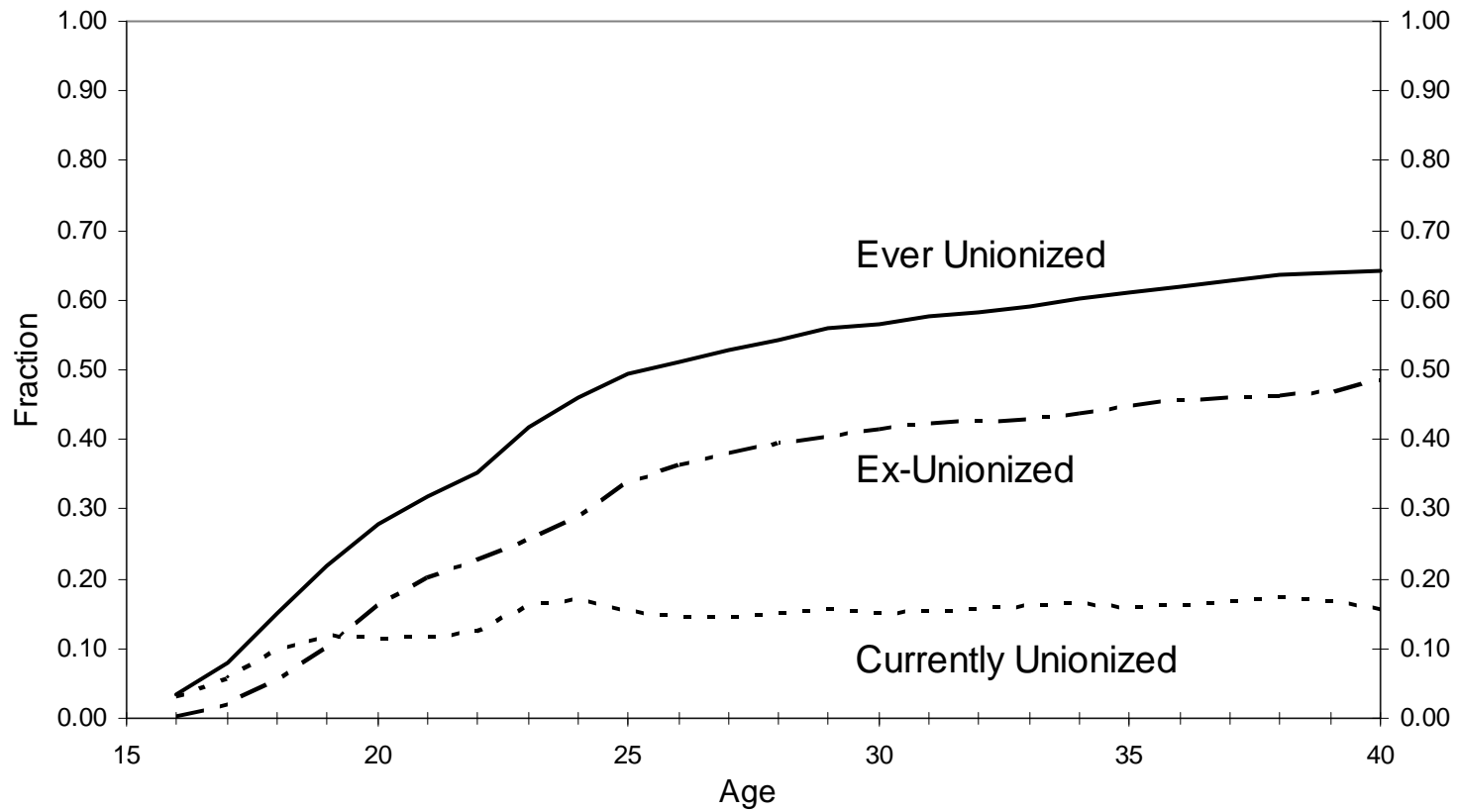
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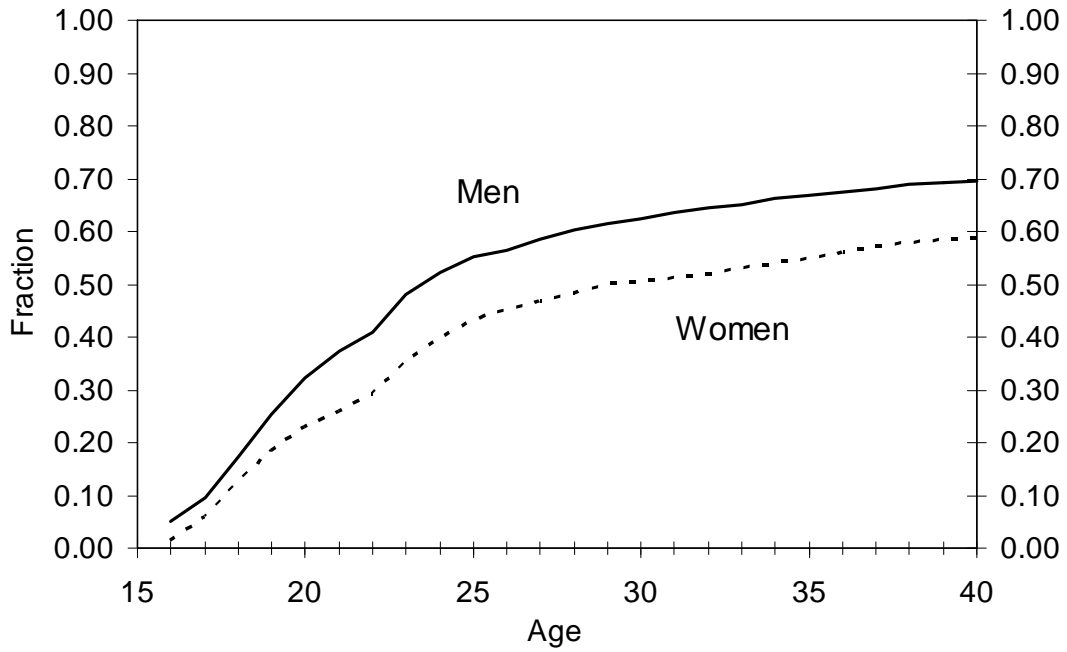
Figure 1
The U.S. Age Profile of Unionization



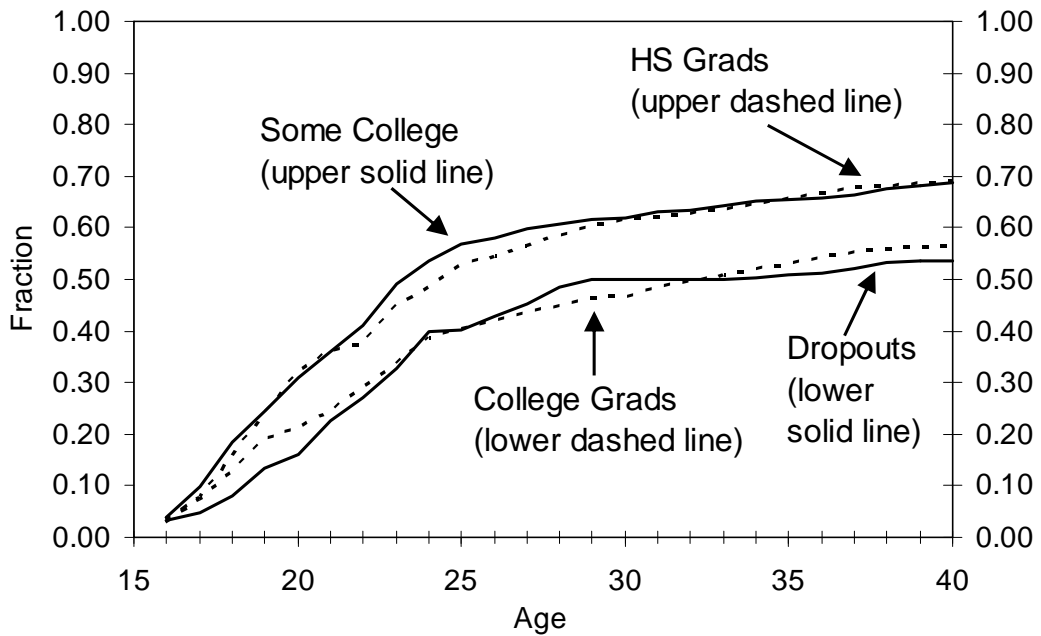
Source: NLSY79 data for 1979-2004 of individuals who were 15 or 16 years old in 1979.

Figure 2
Comparing Age/Ever-Unionized Profiles

a)



b)



Source: NLSY79 data for 1979-2004 of individuals who were 15 or 16 years old in 1979.

Table 1
Summary Statistics for NLSY79 1979/2004^a

	<u>1979</u>	<u>2004</u>
	(1)	(2)
Covered by a Union Contract (Currently Unionized)	0.019 (0.120)	0.149 (0.373)
Ever Unionized	0.019 (0.120)	0.644 (0.474)
Age	15.495 (0.500)	40.495 (0.500)
Female	0.492 (0.498)	0.492 (0.498)
Nonwhite	0.290 (0.500)	0.290 (0.500)
Married	0.008 (0.096)	0.651 (0.492)
Highest Education: High School Not Complete	1.000 (0.000)	0.065 (0.267)
Highest Education: High School Graduate	0.000 (0.000)	0.419 (0.496)
Highest Education: Some College	0.000 (0.000)	0.222 (0.427)
Highest Education: College Graduate	0.000 (0.000)	0.293 (0.433)
Lived in an Urban Area	0.755 (0.424)	0.684 (0.446)
Lived in a Right-to-Work State	0.269 (0.456)	0.385 (0.496)
Local Unemployment Rate (percent)	6.263 (2.013)	5.663 (1.500)
Number of Prior Jobs	0.165 (0.484)	10.967 (6.174)
Worked in Professional and Related Services	0.025 (0.159)	0.230 (0.432)
Worked in Manufacturing	0.033 (0.151)	0.124 (0.320)
Worked in Wholesale and Retail Trade	0.127 (0.316)	0.147 (0.344)
Worked in a Blue-Collar Job	0.073 (0.236)	0.208 (0.410)

Table 1 (continued)

Worked in the Public Sector	0.012 (0.130)	0.137 (0.365)
Average Hours Worked per Week ^b	15.417 (11.400)	40.126 (11.208)
Hourly Wages (2004 dollars) ^c	6.705 (8.126)	20.544 (15.996)
Sample Size	1,507	1,507

Source: NLSY79 data for 1979-2004 of individuals who were 15 or 16 years old in 1979.

Notes: ^a The table contains weighted sample means and standard deviations for the years 1979 and 2004. All job variables reflect the value reported for the job that the individual held as a “current or most recent job.” All of the variables except age, the local unemployment rate, the number of prior jobs, average hours, and the hourly wage are proportions.

^b Hours worked only includes those individuals that reported being employed in that year. This reduces the number of usable observations to 434 in 1979 and 1,328 in 2004.

^c The hourly wages variable excludes individuals who are not working and also individuals reporting a value less than \$1 or greater than \$200. This reduces the number of usable observations to 429 in 1979 and 1,277 in 2004.

Table 2
Unionization Rates Over the Life Cycle^a

Age	Currently Unionized (1)	Ex- Unionized (2)	Ever Unionized (3)	First Unionized (4)	Ever Unionized (Conditional) ^b (5)
16	0.031	0.002	0.034	0.030	0.052
17	0.058	0.021	0.079	0.045	0.123
18	0.098	0.053	0.151	0.072	0.234
19	0.118	0.101	0.220	0.069	0.341
20	0.115	0.163	0.278	0.058	0.431
21	0.117	0.202	0.319	0.041	0.495
22	0.126	0.226	0.353	0.034	0.548
23	0.161	0.257	0.418	0.065	0.649
24	0.170	0.291	0.461	0.043	0.716
25	0.154	0.339	0.493	0.032	0.765
26	0.145	0.365	0.510	0.017	0.791
27	0.146	0.382	0.528	0.018	0.819
28	0.151	0.394	0.544	0.017	0.845
29	0.156	0.403	0.559	0.015	0.868
30	0.150	0.415	0.565	0.006	0.877
31	0.154	0.422	0.576	0.013	0.894
32	0.157	0.426	0.583	0.015	0.906
33	0.163	0.429	0.592	0.016	0.918
34	0.164	0.438	0.602	0.019	0.934
35	0.160	0.450	0.610	0.018	0.947
36	0.161	0.457	0.619	0.017	0.960
37	0.168	0.461	0.628	0.018	0.975
38	0.172	0.463	0.635	0.016	0.985
39	0.169	0.470	0.639	0.011	0.992
40	0.157	0.485	0.642	0.007	1.000

Source: NLSY79 data for 1979-2004 of individuals who were 15 or 16 years old in 1979.

The sample size in columns 1-4 is 1,507 and in column 5 it is 992.

Note: ^a All of the rates are proportions. Column 3 equals column 1 plus column 2.

^b Conditional upon being unionized at least once by age 40/41.

Table 3
Determinants of the Age at Which an Individual is First Unionized

	(1)	(2)
Female	1.148* (0.440)	-0.255 (0.546)
Nonwhite	-0.084 (0.416)	-0.552 (0.461)
Final Education Level: High School Not Complete	-0.386 (0.861)	-0.180 (1.148)
Final Education Level: High School Graduate	-0.650 (0.559)	-0.074 (0.799)
Final Education Level: Some College	-1.331* (0.624)	-0.887 (0.638)
Age when Schooling Completed	---	0.034 (0.042)
Fraction of Sample Period Living in an Urban Area	---	-0.530 (0.721)
Fraction of Sample Period Married	---	-0.231 (0.746)
Fraction of Sample Period Living in a Right-to-Work State	---	-0.134 (0.531)
Number of Prior Jobs at End of Sample	---	0.007 (0.033)
Fraction of Sample Period Working in Professional and Related Services	---	3.436** (1.176)
Fraction of Sample Period Working in Manufacturing	---	-0.159 (0.966)
Fraction of Sample Period Working in Wholesale and Retail Trade	---	-0.165 (1.181)
Fraction of Sample Period Working in a Blue-Collar Job	---	0.808 (1.065)
Fraction of Sample Period Working in the Public Sector	---	2.053* (1.089)
Fraction of Sample Period Spent Without Employment	---	6.416** (2.114)
Average Hours Worked per Week During Sample Period	---	-0.020 (0.035)
Log of Average Hourly Wages During Sample Period (2004 dollars)	---	-8.317** (3.466)

Table 3 (continued)

Log of Average Hourly Wages During Sample Period Squared (2004 dollars)	---	1.342** (0.594)
R ²	0.015	0.065
Sample Size	991	991

Source: NLSY79 data for 1979-2004 of individuals who were 15 or 16 years old in 1979 and who were unionized at some point between age 15/16 and 40/41.

Notes: Each entry contains the coefficient and standard error in parentheses from a weighted ordinary least squares regression model using individual sampling weights. The dependent variable is the age of first exposure to unionization. One observation was excluded due to having an average wage value which exceeded \$200.

** Statistically significant at the 0.05 level, * at the 0.10 level.