



“Honey, I Shrunk the Unions!” The Shift Towards Micro-Unions in the Gig Economy

Insights

12.14.17

As union membership in the private sector continues to dwindle (down to 6.4% in 2016), the American labor movement finds itself at a crossroads with the momentous, non-union gig economy. Just as the economy has evolved juristically over time, organized labor will also be forced to reinvent itself to maintain any form of relevancy. One way this is being done is through micro-unions.

Historically, unions have targeted large groups of workers – often in industrial workplaces – as prime candidates for organizing campaigns. This approach is now increasingly failing. Perhaps no exhibition of this failure is greater than the International Association of Machinists failing to unionize Boeing’s major South Carolina manufacturing plant earlier this year. The election results were not even close, with over 2,000 of the approximately 3,000 eligible voters deciding against the union.

Contrasting this historical approach, formation of micro-unions is advantageous for several reasons. Mainly, it is easier for the union to mold and convey its message to a small cluster of employees than offering a “one-size-fits-all” pitch to a large group of workers. Because such larger groups often have varying job duties, different experiences with the employer, and contain employees who do not even know each other, it is harder for the union’s message to resonate.

The validity of the micro-union approach is now being confirmed by real data, with statistics showing the average successful organizing drive involves a bargaining unit of 25 employees. It also offers a tactical approach for unions to get their foot in the door. If a union is able to make headway for a small segment of workers, other employees in the workplace may initiate their own organizing drive.

So where does the gig economy come into play? The whole idea behind micro-unions is re-thinking and re-branding the labor movement by moving away from the stigma of “traditional” labor and catching up to the modern workplace. The result has been increasing unionization in unchartered industries, including retail pharmacies, high-tech companies, media and entertainment businesses, and delivery services. The United Steelworkers even successfully organized a series of car washes in Los Angeles. With the gig economy producing more freelance contracting jobs with fewer benefits and less worker rights, organizers believe more highly trained professionals – *i.e.* doctors, consultants, engineers – may also seek protection from a union. Gaining such highly trained, highly mobile, and high-wage earning members would be a massive victory for unions nationwide.

In consideration of “winners” under the new-age gig economy, labor unions would not be anticipated to make the list. This new focus on micro-unions could very well change this assessment.