

The Decline of Unionized Labor in the Rust Belt

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In recent news was the foiled plot to kidnap current Governor of Michigan Gretchen Whitmer, by a band of deeply misguided far right men. Such an event, in my eyes, indicates a broader trend, one of a slow but steady societal collapse, our very social fabric unraveling. We may blame this insanity and deterioration on many things, however I find no reason more compelling to explain the trends of ever worsening material conditions that could inspire such dramatic and bombastic plots than the dramatic decline of unionized labor in the former manufacturing powerhouse of the midwest.

In order to substantiate this claim, I must first give the general trends of unionization within what were the labor strongholds for America. This region, commonly denoted as the rust belt or midwest, encompasses states ranging from the western half of New York state, all the way west to Wisconsin's coastline along the Great Lake Michigan, while pushing south all the way into West Virginia and north to Michigan's upper peninsula. This includes portions of New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois and Wisconsin primarily. Once considered central areas for an economy based on manufacturing and coal production, the shift of our national economy to non-coal fossil fuels and finance, insurance and real estate(FIRE) has incidentally left the aforementioned industries to wither away. This trend most notably started in the 70s, as job losses in this sector measured at almost one and a half million, 7.4% of the base(79-89). While this drop may have also coincided with the various recessions that occurred during the time period, employment has also been shown to substantially decrease during booms in the American economy, namely a 20% decrease (3.4 million jobs) from 2000 to

2007, despite this being a period of substantial economic growth (Houseman 3-4). This fits perfectly with the aforementioned national trend, as the housing bubble from this time period represents the growth in FIRE sector growth, and manufacturing employment still declined greatly. Post recession, we can also find more overt political action that caused a further decline in unionized labor among these states, encapsulating not just manufacturing jobs but the public sector as well. Specifically, the right to work laws implemented in Indiana, West Virginia, Michigan, Wisconsin and Kentucky. Right to work laws allow workers to not pay the otherwise mandatory union dues, even if the union still represents that worker, giving unions less money and in general less control over bargaining with employers and thereby less power. Some politicians went even further, such as former Wisconsin governor Scott Walker. His laws forced all unions, not just manufacturing sector ones, to be forced to do a membership vote on their right to exist, every year. If in any of these elections, a majority of the workers voted no on the union's existence, the union would altogether be eliminated. This has caused a decline even in public sector unions, notably a 70% decline for the state employee's union.

(Samuels 18) Taken altogether, this presents a marked decline in unionized labor, with the bureau of labor statistics denoting a percent decrease, between 1989 and 2019, of 13%, 10%, 12%, and 13% for Indiana, Ohio, Wisconsin and Michigan, respectively (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics).

Moving on from the specific state of labor power in this region, what exactly occurs when there is a broad decline in unions? Based on research, the general population faces nothing but suffering. The most obvious measure of the quality of life that ties to employment would be wages. In this sense, unionized labor can clearly be connected to higher wages, one assessment detailing how, if union rates in the private sector remained as high as it was in 1979, wages for

men would be 5% higher, a small looking number but one that adds up to billions in annual wage losses for the working population. (Rosenfeld 4) This not only applies to unionized labor but also has the cascading effect of pressuring employers in any workplace to raise wages under popular pressure, lest the workers start seeing the successes of adjacent workplaces' unions in winning higher wages. This occurred during highly unionized periods in American history, one instance being the employer Eastman Kodak's willingness to keep the workers content by raising pay so that a union was not required to secure certain demands. His factories, notably being located in Western New York, a region once dense with unionized manufacturing labor (Rosenfeld 21). Besides wages, studies link unionized workplaces to being more likely to have pensions by staggering amounts, unionized workplaces leading non unionized by 79% to 17% for having a concrete benefits plan (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics). Outside of material benefits, unions have historically provided a solid basis for social cohesion as well as for social advancements. One study conducted shows that collective bargaining can actually eliminate an otherwise present gender wage gap, due to negotiations being carried out for the whole workforce, instead of individually in a process that more favors men to be granted pay raises than women (Biasi and Sarsons 2). Unionization rates may also lead to less racism, specifically of white workers against black workers. The study finds that unionized workplaces hold less resentment among white workers not just for their African American co-workers but general policies that benefit minority groups such as affirmative action (Frymer and Grumbach 4). Of his time in ILWU, activist Brace Belden notes, "One of the biggest differences I noticed between ILWU work and general left political work is there is a lot less neuroses about race" (Belden). This indicates that even when compared to the usual college educated activist, rank and file labor has a healthier outlook on race. Taken altogether, these clearly display a wide array of the benefits of unionized workplaces

and their ability to secure better material benefits for it's workers and the labor market generally, while also improving social relations and reducing historical tensions based on race and gender by linking these different groups to a common, collective goal.

However, I find it is not enough to detail how unions have generally declined in this region of America and how the decline of unions correlates to lower standards of living. In this paragraph, I intend to zero in on this region, Wisconsin to West New York, to connect the variety of material issues in the region to its lack of labor organization. One of the clearest measures of a drop in living standards is overall population change. While America continues to have an ever expanding population, there is a clear sign of decline concentrated within the rust belt region, with one map detailing large decreases concentrated among former manufacturing cities and towns along the great lakes, such as Detroit, Toledo, Cleveland, Buffalo and Gary. (Beauregard 8). While union decline and population decline are not exactly a cause and effect, but instead are both outcomes of a national economy shifting away from manufacturing jobs, it's important to remember the general side effects of lower rates of organized labor on the population. In these regions, any new jobs created if the region decides to adapt to the newer finance or gig based economy will not be unionized, and by extension leaves the population poorer and with less benefits. One example is Chicago, a city in the region that took a turn towards financial capital, similar to New York City, as manufacturing jobs fled, these new jobs did not provide any sort of increase in unionized labor, (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics). Given that Chicago still ranks highly among the most unequal cities in America , and that political forces pursue austerity in place of substantially reforming policing designed to keep in line a large underclass, it's easy to see that simply revitalizing economic activity in metro areas will not by itself make living conditions better, unionized labor must be present enough to leverage power for the working

class. (Bach 11; Cherone 1) In the case of regions where a loss in unionized labor did not coincide with new, if less stable jobs, the result is an even greater decay along with a population resorting to wide scale opioid addiction. Such is the case for the former coal belt regions like West Virginia, Southern Ohio and Western Pennsylvania, with one graphic detailing severely high overdose mortality rates in these places when compared to the rest of the country, ranging anywhere from 70 to 120 deaths per 100 thousand people (NORC). Again, while the decline of coal was not caused by a decline of unions, the decline of unions because of this shift in energy left behind large swathes of the population without the social institutions that once granted them community, the end result could only be the sort of atomized drug use common with the opioid epidemic.

To bring up one more specific instance of decay there is the attempted kidnapping of Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer. A closer look at some of the men implicated reveals a lot. Joseph Morrison, for example, lived his whole life in the portions of Detroit and Michigan we now associate with post industrial decay, bouncing around aimlessly from college to army to living off his families small inheritance, before setting his sights on kidnapping a Governor (O'Brien 3). Adam Fox, also implicated, lived in the basement of his bosses vacuum shop, as he would've been otherwise homeless. About Fox's connection to the far right militia group who tried to pull off the kidnapping, the boss has said, "I think he had no family, so that was his family." (Baldas and Egan 1). Now it's easy to see this plot as emblematic of a larger mental health crisis, or a political radicalization crisis, but to me it best resembles the unraveling of our social fabric as a result of the death of organized labor, and all of the benefits that come a union

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