

**UCLA**  
**Working Papers**

**Title**

Trade unions, inequality, and democracy in the US and Mexico

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0wt3v445>

**Author**

Tilly, Chris

**Publication Date**

2013-01-06



# WORKING PAPER

**2013 - 2**

## Trade unions, inequality, and democracy in the US and Mexico

**Chris Tilly**

Institute for Research on Labor and Employment  
University of California Los Angeles

**January 2013**

The views expressed in this paper are not the views of The Regents of the University of California or any of its facilities, including UCLA, the UCLA College of Letters and Science, and the IRLE, and represent the views of the authors only. University affiliations of the authors are for identification purposes only, and should not be construed as University approval.



# Trade unions, inequality, and democracy in the US and Mexico

Chris Tilly

Institute for Research on Labor & Employment

University of California Los Angeles

November 2012

Unions have been hailed as defenders of democracy and equality, and damned as preservers of privilege and corruption. The global spread of neoliberalism has intensified this debate world-wide, but nowhere has it reached a higher pitch than in the United States and Mexico. In these two neighboring North American countries, one rich and one middle-income, economic liberals have battered unions over the last three decades, and unions have fought a largely defensive battle. This article surveys unions' activities in recent decades to examine links between unions, democracy, and equality. The central argument is that it is essential to disaggregate the labor movement in order to make sense of these links. Both sides of the debate have merit with reference to *particular currents within the labor movement of each country*. Moreover, even within particular currents, the relationship between unions, democracy, and equality is mixed and complex. Finally, the massive labor migration between the two countries turns out to play a particular role in this set of linkages in the USA.

The article begins with a brief review of relevant literature on the role of unions. A compressed summary of the historical background and main current trends in democracy and inequality in the two countries follows. The heart of the article treats the varied categories of unions in the two countries, and their relationships with democracy and inequality. Concluding remarks close the article.

## **What is unions' role?**

The scholarly literature and political discourse have considered unions' role and impact in two arenas, economic and political. A long-standing tenet of neoclassical economics is that by

raising the compensation rate for labor above a market-clearing level, unions reduce efficiency, causing businesses to substitute capital for labor and hire fewer workers than they would otherwise (see, for example, Hamermesh 1984). Freeman and Medoff (1984) argued instead that unions have two faces, a “monopoly” face that reduces efficiency, but also a “voice” face that can increase it. The second controversial economic question is whether unions exacerbate or abate inequality. Unions are often criticized for bolstering the wages of a privileged minority (Reynolds 1984), for overlooking the needs of women and marginalized workers (Prieto and Quinteros 2005) and for generating disemployment effects that relegate a section of the workforce to unemployment or informal work (Friedman 1962, Lindbeck and Snower 1988). However, I and others have held that unions are economic equalizers (Tilly 2011a).

In the political arena, discussion of unions and democracy is somewhat more complex. This is true in part because there are four distinct elements of this relationship. One is the degree of economic democracy, or worker voice in the workplace. While there is a long history of celebrating such voice as democratic (Webb and Webb 1965 [1897]), economic liberals criticize collective workplace voice as abridging individual freedom to contract (Holcombe and Gwartney 2010). The disagreement here is chiefly normative, so I will not bring empirical information to bear on this element of the debate. A second element is the degree to which unions advocate for the interests of a broader majority, either in pursuit of direct self-interest (e.g. a higher minimum wage may aid unions by blocking low-wage competition, but also benefit the majority of workers) or through broader or more long-term objectives. Again, there are literatures lauding unions for advancing majority interests (Harcourt and Wood 2007), but also deploring union pursuit of self-interest at the expense of vulnerable non-union populations who may make up the majority (Cortazár, Lustig, and Sabot 1998). An added dimension of this element is unions’ roles in democratic transitions as opposed to in the ongoing functioning of democratic polities (Kraus 2007). A third element is unions’ relationships with political parties: union political influence in social democracies is quite different from party control over unions in communist regimes (Crouch and Streeck 2006). The final element is internal union democracy (Lipset, Trow, and Coleman 1956). The various elements interact; for instance, some have suggested that preserving pluralist democracy requires unions to limit internal democracy in order to subordinate their members’ interests to broader social goals (Crouch 1997).

This article does not aspire to resolve these long-running debates. Rather, it takes the debates as context for considering how unions have affected inequality and democracy in the USA and Mexico. The next step is to summarize in general terms the recent evolution of democracy and inequality in the two countries.

### **Democracy and inequality in the USA and Mexico, 1910-2010**

This analysis adopts Tilly's (2007, pp.12-13) compact definition that "a regime is democratic to the degree that political relations between the state and its citizens feature broad, equal, protected, and mutually binding consultation." It considers both categorical inequality (for example, by gender or race), and overall distribution of resources (what are the relative positions of rich, middle income, and poor?).

#### *US U-turn*

Over most of the last century, the USA, in broad terms, has looped from expansion of equality and democracy to contraction of equality and democracy. The National Labor Relations Act, along with other legislation building up a rudimentary welfare state, was enacted in the 1930s under the leadership of President Roosevelt (1933-45). But in the 1970s the arc of history curved in the other direction. Republican Presidents Nixon (1969-74) and especially Reagan (1981-1988) mobilized the fearful and resentful white majority and religious conservatives to cap and reverse the expansion of democracy and to adopt a disequalizing economic program that later became known as neoliberalism. Post-1970 presidents from the Democrats, the other major party, adopted similar programs. Neoliberalism has included economic deregulation, tight controls on inflation (protecting financial creditors) even at the cost of increasing unemployment, reductions in taxes and anti-poverty spending, and free trade agreements and other policies facilitating economic globalization. Large sectors of business pushed for most elements of this program, and also shifted toward outsourcing, more unequal systems of compensation, and fierce opposition to unions. US labor law in the form of the 1935 National Labor Relations Act turned out to be a flimsy protection against employer opposition: it does not impede employer delaying tactics, "captive audience" meetings, one-on-one interrogation of workers, or permanently

replacing strikers; though it does outlaw retaliatory firing, the penalties are so trivial that firings in union campaigns soared from 1 per 689 pro-union votes in 1951-55 to 1 per 38 in 1981-85 (Schmitt and Zipperer 2009). Some have argued that highly individualized civil rights legislation undermined collective rights secured through unions (Frymer 2004, Lichtenstein 2002). Republican administrations starting with Reagan also made a set of administrative decisions regarding the law that cleared the way for employer resistance (Reagan's mass firing of striking air traffic controllers in 1981 set the tone). Union density consequently plummeted from about one-third in the mid-1950s to just over 10 percent today (Schmitt and Zipperer 2009). The cumulative result of these neoliberal changes was a surge in inequality, and particularly of the gap between the very rich and the rest (Danziger and Gottschalk 1993, Tilly 2006). Progress toward racial equality stalled. One dimension in which movement toward equality has continued is gender, but this has chiefly been due to falling real wages for a large proportion of men (Tilly 2006).

US democracy has also wilted. Money increasingly dominates election campaigns (Urofsky 2005), the moreso since the 2010 "Citizens United" Supreme Court decision equating campaign donations with constitutionally protected speech (Youn 2011). "Voter suppression" campaigns designed to deter low-income voters, especially those of color, from coming to the polls through intimidation or added requirements have become ubiquitous, echoing some of the old Jim Crow tactics used to keep blacks from voting (Stringer 2008). Through the so-called War on Drugs and harsh sentencing guidelines, the USA has imprisoned 2.3 million people, 743 per 100,000 population (the highest rate globally), overwhelmingly low-income men of color (Porter 2011, Western 2006). Since most states permanently bar convicted felons from voting, this leads to further exclusion of citizens from voting. And the US War on Terrorism has placed new restrictions on rights to privacy and dissent.

One group squeezed by the intersection of growing inequality and shrinking democracy is undocumented immigrants. As Korzeniewicz and Moran (2009) point out, income inequalities across countries dwarf inequalities within them, and large-scale international migration is one effective way to lessen these yawning cross-national income gaps (though the tradeoffs involved in such migration are hotly debated; see Tilly 2011b). An estimated 11 million undocumented migrants, mostly from Mexico, reside in the United States (Passel and Cohn 2011). Though

virtually all came to work (or are family members of those who came to work) based on labor demand from US employers, they are relegated to a shadowy, highly vulnerable existence under threat of deportation. However, there are prospects for change in US immigration policy, responding to widespread sympathy for migrants among the increasingly numerous voters of Latin American descent. In 2012, President Obama's Deferred Action executive order gave undocumented migrants who came as children a pathway to temporary legal residency. In late 2012, as this article was completed, there was much prognostication that Republicans, stung by low levels of support from Latino voters that contributed to Democrat Obama's reelection as President, were likely to join Democrats in passing a limited version of comprehensive immigration reform, including a broader pathway to citizenship for unauthorized immigrants.

*Mexico: From revolution to liberalization*

Mexico started the last hundred years in revolution, only to end up with neoliberal economic policy and highly constrained democracy. Modern Mexico began with the 1910-20 Mexican Revolution. The 1917 Constitution and the 1931 Federal Labor Law established protections for unions and labor, and also instituted mechanisms of government control over unions, notably through periodic approval of union charters and leadership. Populist President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940) consolidated the one-party rule of the Institutional Revolutionary Party by nationalizing key industries (notably petroleum), carrying out land reform, building a corporatist system that included unions along with peasant organizations and other sectors, and promoting union organization within the corporatist framework. On Tilly's definition of democracy, the Revolution and Cárdenas's populist corporatism democratized by ending dictatorship and establishing consultation with popular organizations, but limited democracy by confining consultation to the elites at the top of the organizations. In terms of equality, policies of land reform, nationalization, unionization, and establishment of the corporatist pact were redistributive.

From the late 1940s through the 1970s, Mexico, like most of the rest of Latin America, followed an economic strategy of import substitution. But Mexico's import substitution model ran aground on the Third World debt crisis, and starting in the 1980s the country moved to a neoliberal export-oriented model featuring free trade agreements, privatization of public



enterprises, slashing of subsidies, partial reversal of land reform, and promotion of export assembly (Cook 2007). Earnings and employment growth over this period have been slow and irregular, and the changes have disrupted traditional livelihoods in agriculture and manufacturing (Bortz and Aguila 2006, Cook 2007, Cortés 2006, Pérez, Schlesinger, and Wise 2009). Real wages fell in the 1980s and 1990s, and grew slowly in the 2000s (Bortz and Aguila 2006, Salas and Cepeda 2003, 2006). However, total incomes actually grew faster at the bottom than at the top of the income distribution between 1977-2002, in large part due to the Solidaridad/Oportunidades program of conditional cash transfers to the poorest. Real median monthly income grew 3 percent overall over this period, but 35 percent in the lowest decile and only 5 percent in the top decile (calculated from Cortés 2006 Table 3), though at the very top liberalization and privatization created a new class of billionaires led by telecommunications and retail magnate Carlos Slim, by some measures the richest man in the world. Meanwhile, a constant in Mexican history has been marginalization and poverty of indigenous populations, an issue dramatized by the Zapatista movement that emerged in 1994.

As dissatisfaction with the government grew, the National Action Party (PAN) flanking the PRI to the right and the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) to its left gained support. It is widely believed that the PRI stole the 1988 presidential election from Cuauhtemoc Cárdenas (son of Lázaro), representing the coalition that later coalesced into the PRD. Partly in response to the scandal, Presidents Salinas (1988-2004) and Zedillo (2004-2010) undertook political liberalization. In 1998 the PRI finally lost majority control of the parliament, and in the 2000 presidential elections PAN candidate Vicente Fox was elected, ending seven decades of PRI rule. These changes did not signal a transition to thorough-going democracy, however. In 2006 supporters of PRD presidential candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador claimed, with some credible evidence, that the election was stolen by the PAN's Felipe Calderón, and there have been many instances of repression, corruption, and chicanery at the state and local levels. Moreover, the spike in violence associated with Calderón's escalation of the war on drugs has claimed the lives of journalists, politicians, and grassroots activists, led to restrictions on civil rights, and created a general atmosphere of fear and suspicion. In 2012, amidst widespread disenchantment with the PAN's Calderón, PRI standard-bearer Enrique Peña Nieto won the presidency back for his party.

Both the end of the PRI monopoly and the neoliberal turn have chilled government relations with unions. In 1997, a number of unions broke away from the CTM to join with independent unions in forming the National Workers' Union (UNT) federation. In subsequent symbolically weighty actions, the Fox administration attempted to oust the leadership of the militant miners' union, and Calderón used a lightning military operation to close the publicly owned Mexico City light and power company and fire the unionized workers. Unionization statistics are notoriously problematic, but the best estimates indicate that union density fell from 14 to 10 percent between 1992 and 2002. Beginning in the 1980s, successive Mexican administrations also sought to liberalize the labor laws and lessen worker protections (Cook 2007, Dion 2010, de la Garza 2011). Over the same period, growth of formal employment has lagged and informal employment falling outside the reach of labor law has claimed a growing share of the labor force, in a form of *de facto* liberalization (Levy 2008). In November 2012, Mexico finally passed a labor law revision that increased employer flexibility and scaled back labor standards dating back to the 1930s.

With regard to migration, Mexico occupies an interesting intermediate position. As noted above, it is the major sender of migrants to the USA, and indeed the Mexican economy depends crucially on migrant remittances (Laglagaron 2010). At the same time, Mexico is a major recipient and transit point for migrants from other Latin American countries, and has been criticized for poor treatment of those migrants and for failing to protect them from growing kidnapping and extortion activities by organized crime (Tilly and Kennedy 2007).

### **Unions, democracy, and equality in the USA and Mexico**

In this section, I will consider (1) the relative degree to which unions defend privilege or extend equality; (2) their relationship with political parties and the party system; (3) the nature and degree of internal democracy within unions, in the two countries. To understand the relationship between unions, democracy, and equality in the USA and Mexico, it is essential to disaggregate unions into different streams or traditions. I will disaggregate unions according to an inequality logic in the USA and a political logic in Mexico (and therefore will present the analysis in a different order in each country), because these are the logics most salient in the two countries.

### *US unions and inequality*

In the USA, unions' relationship to inequality, and particularly categorical inequality, is a particularly important dividing line. Examining the relationship between unions and inequality requires looking at both aggregate or class inequality (particularly divisions between skilled and unskilled workers) and categorical inequality. Categories of gender, race and ethnicity, and recency of immigration are particularly important. To divide up US unions, I build on and update a typology proposed by Milkman (1990), drawing also on insights from Asher and Stephenson (1990), Fine and Tichenor (2009), Moreno (2006), and Zieger (2007). There have been five major, lasting cohorts and forms of unionism in the United States, and each cohort has had, and continues to have, a predominant relationship with unskilled workers, women, people of color, and to some extent new immigrant groups. Dating back to the 19th century, the earliest stable unions were white, male-dominated skilled craft unions, such as those in the building trades and printing, who historically viewed women and people of color with suspicion as low-wage competitors—and to a large extent continue to do so. These unions made up the American Federation of Labor, one component of today's AFL-CIO (other union movements from that era, such as the Knights of Labor and later the International Workers of the World, welcomed women and people of color, but did not survive.) A second wave of unionism in the 1910s, especially in the clothing and textile industries, sought to organize women and Southern and Eastern European immigrants, both of whom made up a growing portion of the workforce in these industries—but maintained a paternalistic attitude toward them as vulnerable workers in need of particular protection. The reality was more complicated than this attitude would allow: women, for instance, were particularly subject to employer abuse in the early decades of the century, but also led and took part in militant actions such as the 1909 "Uprising of the 20,000", a hard-fought 13-week strike of women shirtwaist workers in New York City. From this second wave going forward, new unions have tended to organize unskilled as well as skilled workers.

The tide turned for women and people of color in the labor movement with the 1930s organizing of industrial unions by the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), which later in 1955 merged with the AFL. Women, African Americans, and immigrants were integral to the mass production manufacturing industries in the 1930s and 1940s, and the CIO generally

organized them as equals and took a formal stand against race and gender discrimination (Stevenson 1991). The fourth wave, consisting of service, clerical, and public sector unions that grew after World War II have organized occupations that are predominantly female (nurses, teachers, clerical workers) and/or disproportionately held by workers of color (janitors, hospitality workers, security guards, public sector workers), and have been powerfully influenced by the feminist movement, the African American civil rights movement, and movements of other people of color. Unions from this wave, such as the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the Hotel and Restaurant Employees (HERE, now UNITE HERE), the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), the American Nurses Association (ANA), and the National Education Association (NEA), have promoted women and people of color as leaders, have campaigned for gender pay equity and family-friendly policies, and have (at times) explicitly incorporated racial and ethnic equity in their demands and campaigns. These unions have in general supported immigrant rights and tapped the energy of immigrant workers, as in SEIU's highly successful Justice for Janitors campaign (Lerner, Hurst, and Adler 2008, Waldinger *et al.* 1998). Finally, in the last twenty years a fifth wave of community unionism has emerged, represented by worker centers based primarily in immigrant communities and organizing what have come to be called "excluded workers" such as day laborers, domestic workers, most restaurant workers, and farm workers (United Workers Congress 2012, Fine 2006, Milkman, Bloom, and Narro 2010). US unions have generally supported comprehensive immigration reform with a path to citizenship for undocumented workers since about 2000, but service unions and community unions, with their disproportionately immigrant membership, have been far more committed and vocal, and for community unions immigrant rights have been a central organizing issue. (Of course, there are always exceptions to the rule: the Laborers Union, one of the craft-based building trades, has been extremely active on immigrant rights.) Service and community unions have also taken stronger stands on class inequality, promoting campaigns for a higher minimum wage and even supporting the insurgent "Occupy" or "99 percent" movement that occupied public spaces in 2011 to protest inequality.

In the aggregate, at least in the post-World War II period, Freeman and Medoff (1984) and a large subsequent literature have concluded that by raising wages more for those otherwise

lower paid, US unions on net make pay more equal (Freeman 2007, Western and Rosenfeld 2011). Indeed, the weakening of unions has contributed to increasing inequality (Western and Rosenfeld 2011).

### *US unions and democracy*

The political stances of the distinct waves of unions also varied, although US unions have always been independent in the sense of not being formally allied with, or governed by the discipline of, any political party. The AFL craft unions espoused a political philosophy of “voluntarism”, meaning that government should not seek to regulate employment or provide welfare but should allow unions and employers to negotiate terms. The craft unions were integrated into the New Deal coalition with the 1955 AFL-CIO merger, but remain more socially and economically conservative on the whole. The CIO unions and the textile and apparel unions, on the other hand, were the left bulwark of the New Deal coalition, with a strong socialist and Communist presence until the post-World War II purges, and have consistently supported employment regulation and a welfare state. Key CIO unions such as the United Auto Workers supported the black civil rights movement as well. Service and public sector unions stand even farther to the left, pushing for more redistributive policies and regulatory policies to raise the floor of the labor market. Community unions have focused advocacy on policies to benefit the most marginalized workers, such as wage theft ordinances and domestic worker bills of rights (adopted at the state level in New York), and immigration reform. Despite these differences, today virtually all unions oppose neoliberal policies, so to the extent that neoliberal policies serve the elite (Harvey 2005), unions are giving voice to the interests of the majority. In the American two-party system, the two labor federations (the AFL-CIO and the Change to Win federation of unions led by SEIU that bolted in 2005) and almost all large unions are allied with the Democratic Party, the more left of the two parties. Indeed, the unions are a vital source of financial support and electoral mobilization for the Democrats (Tilly 2011c). This leads to a certain ambivalence on campaign finance reform, since restrictions on large contributions would hobble the labor movement’s ability to support favored candidates and causes.

With regard to union democracy, US unions have a mix of characteristics, and the degree of internal democracy does not vary systematically across the waves. Each union includes both

*administrative* and *representative* structures; the administrative structures are most often stronger and more developed (Jarley, Fiorito, and Delaney 1997). Unions are typically *one-party organizations*, in which the current leadership controls both the administrative and representative apparatus, and space for dissent and independent organizing is limited (Lipset, Trow, and Coleman 1956, Summers 2000, Voss 2010). Thus “the great paradox of the American labor movement: democratic for the outside; restrictive and bureaucratic for the inside,” in the words of Herman Benson (cited in Moberg 2005 p.106). At the same time, US unions are mostly relatively decentralized, and there is evidence that effective union action depends on responsiveness to members and involvement and mobilization of members (Levi *et al.* 2009, Lopez 2004). And as Voss (2010) points out, unions’ efforts to “aggregate the interests of diverse workers and represent new constituencies” (p.369) constitute other dimensions of democracy. Community unions are a special case that illustrates Voss’s point: they encourage grassroots involvement, but are typically organized as NGOs rather than representative membership organizations, which places some limits on their accountability to workers.

#### *Mexican unions and democracy*

The key dividing line among Mexican unions is that between “official” and “independent” unions (Bensusán and Alcalde 2000, Kohout 2008, Zazueta and de la Peña 1981). Official unions are those that maintain a pact with the state: they will provide political support and wage restraint in return for preferential government recognition (allowing them to expand membership and collect dues), access to patronage, and other benefits. Independent unions are those that eschew such a pact. A third category consists of “white” or sweetheart unions, i.e. unions that represent the interests of the employer rather than the workers (functioning primarily to block any possibility of establishing a genuine union). Roxborough (1984), Middlebrook (1995), and Tilly (2009) have cautioned against drawing broader conclusions about union behavior from the distinction between official and independent unions. Some official unions militantly defend worker interests, and, at least during the import substitution era, economic benefits for workers (growing real wages, close-to-full employment, and a welfare state) were part of the pact.

According to one estimate, in 1980 official unions made up 74 percent of unions (and 84 percent of unionized workers), white unions (controlled directly by employers) 14 percent, and independent unions 12 percent (de la Garza 1993). Official and white unions are primarily part of the Labor Congress (CT) a grouping of federations, of which the largest by far is the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM). Historically, the CT and CTM were integrated into the PRI ruling party's organizational structure, and were committed to supporting the PRI's authoritarian rule rather than pushing for democracy as their counterparts did elsewhere in Latin America (Brickner 2010). The PRI loosened these ties in 1988 by reducing the number of parliamentary seats allocated to labor leaders, and even more in 1990 by shifting from a sectoral to a territorial organizational form (Cook 2007). To be sure, the logic of official unionism was clearer during one-party rule and before neoliberalism shifted the state's allegiances away from unions. But the state retains the power to reward or punish unions, as Fox's and Calderón's high profile attacks on the miners' and electrical worker unions, and conversely their alliance with leader Elba Esther Gordillo of the teacher's union (SNTE), have demonstrated. In this context, and given limited their capacity to mobilize workers (Middlebrook 1995), official unions have clung to what's left of the historic pact with the state. They have not been, and are not now, a force for democracy.

As noted above, the National Workers' Union (UNT) is the main confederation bringing together independent unions. Some independent unions remain outside the UNT (the miner's union remains part of the CTM), and there are also some powerful independent-minded factions within the official unions, most notably the National Coalition of Education Workers (CNTE), a reform group within the teachers' union dating back to 1979 (Cook 1996). Independent unions have also been joined by community union-type organizations, especially in the export assembly sector (Bensusán and Tilly 2010, Collins 2006, Frambach 2010-11). By design, the UNT and other independent and community unions are not affiliated with any particular party, but their sharp criticism of neoliberal policy and advocacy for working class interests tends to align them with the center-left Party of the Democratic Revolution, and with other popular forces. Independent unions and independent factions within official unions have been advocates for expanding Mexican democracy.

As regards internal union democracy, to start with, white unions are by definition not representative of the workers, and in fact members of these unions may be unaware of the unions' existence (Tilly and Álvarez 2006). And for all unions, the state's ability to intervene has generally been used to stifle internal democracy rather than stimulate it, and governing parties for labor reform have emphasized flexibilization rather than democratization, all of which dampens efforts to expand internal democracy (de la Garza 2003, Rendón 2001). Indeed, in adopting reform of labor laws in 2012, the center-right PRI, which historically has had the strongest ties to official unions, defeated left proposals to include provisions democratizing unions. Tendentially, official unions are more centralized and top-down, with little involvement of membership, whereas independent unions are more democratic, but there is variation within both categories. For example, the independent electrical workers' union has exercised procedural and substantive democracy, but the newly independent miners' union remains hierarchical, headed by the son of the former union boss who put down insurgents within the union. As in the USA, community unions combine grassroots mobilization with an often non-representative NGO form of organization.

#### *Mexican unions and inequality*

Once again, I consider union practices with respect to race, class, and gender inequality. Though the marginalization of indigenous people, the main ethnic divide in Mexico, is a critically important issue for the nation, indigenous identity is mainly limited to rural communities where unions have little presence (López 1991). Unions are also strongest in the industrialized, urbanized north and center of the country, and weakest in the poorer, more indigenous south. In any case, unions have not focused on the needs of indigenous workers. However, independent unions have formed *political* alliances with the indigenous Zapatista movement and other rural organizations as part of mobilizing against neoliberalism (Khasnabish 2005). Moreover, within the teachers' union, which has national reach, southern Mexican teachers, many indigenous, from the southern states of Chiapas and Oaxaca have played an active revitalizing role. Indigenous teachers from Chiapas began organizing in the early 1970s that laid the basis for forming the CNTE reform organization within the union (Street 1996), and



indigenous teachers from Oaxaca went on strike and precipitated the uprising in that state in 2006 (Arenal 2007).

Most Mexican unions are industrial in form, meaning that they seek to organize all workers, skilled and unskilled, within an enterprise (de la Garza 2003). Unions have been less effective in extending their reach to industries with high concentrations of unskilled or low-paid workers. The strongest unions are those based in the public sector and other monopoly industries (petroleum, mining, transportation, and the like) (Bensusán and Alcalde 2000). Among the large unions, there is no equivalent to the USA-based SEIU's use of its base in the public sector and health care to subsidize the Justice for Janitors campaign. But the Frente Auténtico de Trabajo, a small federation that has become part of the UNT, actively organizes informal and self-employed workers into cooperatives and regional organizations of producers. Fairris (2003) estimates that overall, Mexican unions equalize wages, but that decreasing union density and waning within-industry strength significantly reduced this equalizing effect between 1984 and 1996.

Mexican unions' attitudes toward women show historical waves of development somewhat akin to those in the USA, although lagging behind. This lag might appear surprising, given that the 1917 Mexican Constitution mandates equal pay for women and bars gender discrimination, provisions not incorporated into US law until the 1960s. However, sexism and traditional roles are deeply entrenched in Mexican society, and unions have shared these ideologies (Brickner 2010). Historically, unions in manufacturing adopted a masculinist ideology and excluded women (Gauss 2003), and were slow to organize female-dominated industries such as apparel manufacturing (Olcott 2003). Public sector unions, such as the SNTE teachers' union and the telephone workers' union (telephony was a state monopoly until privatized in 1990), have incorporated women from the beginning (60 percent of Mexican teachers, and half of telephone workers, are women). However, these unions' historical pattern was paternalistic, protective inclusion of women similar to the early garment and textile unions in the USA. The SNTE teachers' union, founded in 1943, did not have its first woman leader until 1989, and despite this change at the top, leadership remains male-dominated (Cook 1996). Women have played a stronger leadership role in dissident movements within the SNTE (Arenal 2007, Cook 1996, Street 1996).

Brickner (2010) draws a contrast between the gendered practices of corporatist and democratic unions in Mexico, categories roughly corresponding to official and independent unions. She argues that the democratic unions have been far more open to addressing gender issues, but that action on those issues depends not just on democracy, but on women pushing for and leading changes within the unions. Over time, the UNT federation of independent unions has become an outspoken advocate of gender equity, and a number of UNT-affiliated unions have created offices of women's affairs, have challenged gender discrimination and gender-typing of jobs, and have done membership education on women's rights, domestic violence, and other gender issues. The community unions, which include some women-only organizations, are even more outspoken, often organizing themselves on explicitly feminist principles and actively promoting women's leadership (Collins 2006, Frambach 2010-11).

## **Conclusion**

The economic and political landscapes in the USA and Mexico are grim. In the USA, inequality has soared and democracy has declined over the last four decades. In Mexico, the poorest have benefited from new welfare programs but the working class has lost economic ground. Procedural democracy has advanced in Mexico with the shift to a multiparty system, but abuses of procedural democracy continue, and arguably the shift to neoliberalism at the expense of the majority marks backward movement in substantive democracy. The ascendancy of neoliberalism, including attacks on unions and workers' right to collective action, are a common feature of the two countries.

In this unfavorable context, to what extent have unions defended equality and democracy? The answer depends greatly on *which* unions are in question. Unions have in general acted to moderate class inequalities (though Mexico's white unions instead work to preserve those inequalities). But when it comes to promoting the interests of unskilled and informal workers, women, and, in the USA, people of color and immigrants, unions have shown varying degrees of commitment. In the USA, service and public sector unions and the new crop of community unions have taken the lead in organizing and advocating for these subaltern populations, whereas earlier waves of unions have been more ambivalent or even hostile to these

populations. In Mexico, independent unions and, again, community unions have led in confronting gender inequality and representing informal workers; official unions have largely preserved male domination and limit their scope to formal workers.

Different categories of unions have also differed in their orientations to political and intra-union democracy. In the USA, each successive wave of unions was historically increasingly committed to political democracy, but at this point virtually all unions are united in opposition to the undemocratic aspects of neoliberalism. A weak point in US unions' support for democracy is their ambivalence on campaign finance reform. In Mexico, there is a sharper distinction in how different groups of unions relate to political democracy. Official unions trace their roots to authoritarian corporatism, and continue to support the state with all its authoritarian aspects. Independent and community unions, in contrast, continually challenge and dissent from the state and its policies, advocating for greater substantive and procedural democracy.

Democracy *within* unions is not a shining union strength in either country. In the USA, unions typically function as one-party organizations, though as Voss (2003) points out limited accountability to the current membership may paradoxically make it easier to serve broader working class interests. In Mexico, independent unions function somewhat more democratically, but hierarchy is widespread and entrenched.

Overall, the balance sheet for democracy and equality in the USA and Mexico is discouraging. Unions, with their mixed record on these issues, have so far not been able to transform this vista to a more positive one. But there is potential in pro-democracy, pro-equality practices championed by the more recent waves of unions in the USA, and by independent unions in Mexico. If broader sections of the labor movement in the two countries can be mobilized to undertake similar practices, perhaps unions can once more become a powerful equalizing and democratizing force.

## References

- Arenal, Electa. 2007. "Women in the Oaxaca teachers' strike and citizens' uprising." *Feminist Studies* 33(1): 107-117.
- Asher, Robert and Charles Stephenson, eds. 1990. *Labor Divided: Race and Ethnicity in United States Labor Struggles, 1835-1960*. Albany : State University of New York Press.
- Bensusán, Graciela and Arturo Alcalde. 2000. "Estructura sindical y agremiación." In *Trabajo y Trabajadores en el México Contemporáneo*, edited by Arturo Alcalde, Graciela Bensusán, Enrique de la Garza, Enrique Hernández Laos, Teresa Rendón, and Carlos Salas, 163-192. Mexico City: Miguel Ángel Porrúa.
- Bensusán, Graciela and Maria Lorena Cook. 2003. "Political transition and labor revitalization in Mexico." In *Labor Revitalization: Global Perspectives and New Initiatives*, eds. Daniel B. Cornfield and Holly J. McCammon, 229–267. Oxford, UK: Elsevier.
- Graciela Bensusán and Chris Tilly. 2010. "Confronting globalization: Lessons from Puebla." *New Labor Forum* 19(3): 65-69.
- Bortz, Jeffrey and Marcos Aguila. 2006. "Earning a living: A history of real wage studies in twentieth-century Mexico." *Latin American Research Review* 41(2): 112-138.
- Brickner, Rachel K. 2010. "Feminist activism, union democracy and gender equity rights in Mexico." *Journal of Latin American Studies*. 42: 749-777.
- Collins, Jane. 2006. Redefining the boundaries of work: Apparel workers and community unionism in the global economy." *Identities* 13(1):9-31.
- Cook, Maria Lorena. 2007. *The Politics of Labor Reform in Latin America: Between Flexibility and Rights*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Cook, Maria Lorena. 1996. *Organizing Dissent: Unions, the State, and the Democratic Teachers' Movement in Mexico*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Cortazár, René, Nora Lustig, and Richard H. Sabot. 1998. "Economic policy and labor market dynamics." In *Beyond Trade-Offs: Market Reform and Equitable Growth in Latin America*, eds. Nancy Birdsall, Carol Graham, and Richard H. Sabot, 183-212. Washington, DC: Inter-American Development Bank and Brookings Institution Press.
- Cortés, Fernando. 2006. "La incidencia de la pobreza y la concentración del ingreso en México." In *La Situación del Trabajo en México 2006*, eds. Enrique de la Garza and Carlos Salas, 91-123. Mexico City: Plaza y Valdés.

- Crouch, Colin. 1979. "The state, capital, and liberal democracy." In *State and Economy in Contemporary Capitalism*, ed. Colin Crouch, 15-34. London: Croon Helm.
- Crouch, Colin and Wolfgang Streeck. 2006. *The Diversity of Democracy : Corporatism, Social Order and Political Conflict*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.
- Danziger, Sheldon and Peter Gottschalk, eds. 1993. *Uneven Tides: Rising Inequality in America*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Dion, Michelle L. 2010. *Workers and Welfare: Comparative Institutional Change in Twentieth-Century Mexico*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010.
- Esquinca, Marco Tulio and Javier Melgoza Valdivia. 2006. "La afiliación sindical y premio salarial en México." In *La Situación del Trabajo en México 2006*, eds. Enrique de la Garza and Carlos Salas, 91-123. Mexico City: Plaza y Valdés.
- Fairris, David. 2003. Unions and wage inequality in Mexico." *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 56(3): 481-497
- Fine, Janice. 2006. *Worker Centers: Organizing Communities at the Edge of the Dream*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Fine, Janice and Daniel J. Tichenor. 2009. "A movement wrestling: American labor's enduring struggle with immigration, 1866-2007." *Studies in American Political Development* 23: 218-248.
- Frambach, Heather. 2010-11. "¡Soy mexicana y tengo derechos! Independent labor organizing on the US-Mexico border." *Journal of Workplace Rights* 15(3-4) 425-44.
- Freeman, R. B. (2007). "What do unions do? The 2004 M-Brane Stringtwister Edition." In *What Do Unions Do? A Twenty-Year Perspective*. J. T. Bennett and B. E. Kaufman, 607-36. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- Freeman, R. B. and J. L. Medoff (1984). *What Do Unions Do?* New York, Basic Books.
- Friedman, M. (1962). *Capitalism and Freedom*. [Chicago], University of Chicago Press.
- Frymer, Paul. "Race, labor, and the twentieth-century American state." 2004. *Politics and Society* 32(4): 475-509.
- De la Garza Toledo, Enrique. 2011. "Los Proyectos de Reforma Laboral a diciembre de 2010." Unpublished paper, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Iztapalapa, Mexico City.
- De la Garza Toledo, Enrique. 2003. "La crisis de los modelos sindicales y sus opciones." In

In *La Situación del Trabajo en México 2006*, eds. Enrique de la Garza and Carlos Salas, 91-123. Mexico City: Plaza y Valdés.

De la Garza Toledo, Enrique. 1993. *Reestructuración Productiva y Respuesta Sindical en México*. Mexico city: Instituto de Investigaciones Economicas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

De la Garza Toledo, Enrique. 2006. "La polémica acerca de la tasa de sindicalización en México." In *La Situación del Trabajo en México 2006*, eds. Enrique de la Garza and Carlos Salas, 486-496. Mexico City: Plaza y Valdés.

Gauss, Susan M. 2003. "Masculine Bonds and Modern Mothers: The Rationalization of Gender in the Textile Industry in Puebla, 1940-1952." *International Labor and Working-Class History* 63: 63-80

Hamermesh, Daniel. 1984. *The Economics of Work and Pay*, 3rd edition. New York: Harper and Row.

Harcourt, Mark and Geoffrey Wood (eds.). 2007. *Trade Unions and Democracy: Strategies and Perspectives*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

Harvey, David. 2005. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Holcombe, Randall G. and James D. Gwartney. 2010. "Unions, freedom, and economic growth." *Cato Journal* 30(1): 1-22.

Jarley, Paul, Jack Fiorito, John Thomas Delaney. 1997. "A structural contingency approach to bureaucracy and democracy in U.S. national unions." *The Academy of Management Journal* 40(4): 831-861.

Khasnabish, Alex. 2005. "They are our brothers and sisters": Why Zapatismo matters to independent labour in Mexico." *Anthropologica* 47(1): 101-114

Kohout, Michal. 2008. "The new labor culture and labor law reform in Mexico." *Latin American Perspectives* 35: 135-151.

Korzeniewicz, R. P. and T. P. Moran. 2009. *Unveiling Inequality: A World Historical Perspective*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Kraus, Jon. 2007. *Trade Unions and the Coming of Democracy in Africa*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Laglagaron, Laureen (2010) *Protection through Integration: The Mexican Government's Efforts to Aid Migrants in the United States*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.

Lerner, Stephen, Jill Hurst, and Glenn Adler, "Fighting and winning in the outsourced economy: Justice for janitors at the University of Miami." In *The Gloves-Off Economy: Problems and Possibilities at the Bottom of the American Labor Market*, eds. Annette Bernhardt, Heather Boushey, Laura Dresser, and Chris Tilly. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Margaret Levi, David Olson, Jon Agnone and Devin Kelly. 2009. "Union democracy reexamined." *Politics and Society* 37: 203-228.

Levy, Santiago. 2008. *Good Intentions, Bad Outcomes: Social Policy, Informality, and Economic Growth in Mexico*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.

Lindbeck, Assar, and Dennis J. Snower. 1988. *The Insider-Outsider Theory of Employment and Unemployment*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Lipset, Seymour Martin, Martin A. Trow, and James Samuel Coleman. 1956. *Union Democracy*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1956.

Lichtenstein, Nelson. 2002. *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

López Monjardín, Adriana. 1991. "Organization and struggle among agricultural workers in Mexico." In *Unions, Workers, and the State in Mexico*, ed. Kevin J. Middlebrook, 184-212. San Diego: Center for US-Mexican Studies, University of California, San Diego.

Lopez, Steven H. 2004. *Reorganizing the Rust Belt: An Inside Study of the American Labor Movement*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004

Middlebrook, Kevin J. 1995. *The Paradox of Revolution: Labor, the State, and Authoritarianism in Mexico*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Milkman, Ruth. 1990. "Gender and trade unionism in historical perspective." *Women, Politics, and Change*, eds. Louise A. Tilly and Patricia Gurin, 87-107. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Milkman, Ruth, Joshua Bloom, and Victor Narro, eds. 2010. *Working for Justice: The L.A. Model of Organizing and Advocacy*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Moberg, David. 2005. "Defending union democracy." *Dissent*, Fall 2005, 105-108.

Paul D. Moreno. 2006. *Black Americans and Organized Labor: A New History*. Baton Rouge : Louisiana State University Press.

Jocelyn Olcott . 2003. "Miracle workers: Gender and state mediation among textile and garment workers in Mexico's transition to industrial development." *International Labor and Working Class History* 63: 45-62.

- Passel, Jeffrey S. and D'Vera Cohn. 2011. *Unauthorized Immigrant Population: National and State Trends, 2010*. Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center.
- Pérez, Mamerto Sergio Schlesinger, y Timothy A. Wise. 2009. *La Promesa y los Peligros de la Liberalización del Comercio Agrícola: Lecciones de América Latina*. La Paz, Bolivia: Asociación de Instituciones de Promoción y Educación.
- Porter, Nicole D. 2011. The State of Sentencing 2010: Developments in Policy and Practice. <http://sentencingproject.org/doc/publications/publications/Final%20State%20of%20the%20Sentencing%202010.pdf>. Washington, DC: The Sentencing Project, February.
- Prieto, Marina and Carolina Quinteros. 2005. "Never the twain shall meet? Women's organizations and labor unions in the *maquila* industry in Central America." In *Development NGOs and Labor Unions: Terms of Engagement*, eds. Deborah Eade and Alan Leather, 183–94. Bloomfield CT: Kumarian Press.
- Rendón Corona, Armando. 2001. "Libertad sindical versus democratización sindical." In *El Sindicalismo en México Ante El Nuevo Milenio: Una Perspectiva Global*, edited by Raquel Partida, Alfonso Bouzas, Patricia Revelo, and Óscar Contreras, 127-152. Guadalajara and Mexico City: Universidad de Guadalajara, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, and Sindicato de Trabajadores Académicos de la Universidad de Guadalajara.
- Reynolds, Morgan O. 1984. *Power and Privilege: Labor Unions in America*. New York : Universe Books, 1984.
- Roxborough, Ian. 1984. *Unions and Politics in Mexico: The Case of the Automobile Industry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Salas, Carlos and Eduardo Zepeda. 2006. "Ocupación e ingresos en México: 2000-2004." In *La Situación del Trabajo en México 2006*, eds. Enrique de la Garza and Carlos Salas, 125-150. Mexico City: Plaza y Valdés.
- Salas, Carlos and Eduardo Zepeda. 2003. "Empleo y salarios en el México contemporáneo." In *La Situación del Trabajo en México 2003*, eds. Enrique de la Garza and Carlos Salas. Mexico City: Plaza y Valdés.
- Schmitt, John and Ben Zipperer. 2009. *Dropping the Ax: Illegal Firings During Union Election Campaigns, 1951-2007*. Washington, DC: Center for Economic and Policy Research.
- Stevenson, Marshall F., Jr. 1991. "Challenging the roadblocks to equality: Race relations and civil rights in the CIO 1935-1955." Working Paper 6, Center for Labor Research, Ohio State University, Columbus, OH.



- Street, Susan. 1996. "Democratization 'from below' and popular culture: Teachers from Chiapas, Mexico." *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 15: 261-279.
- Stringer, Jordan T. 2008. "Criminalizing voter suppression: The necessity of restoring legitimacy in federal elections and reversing disillusionment in minority communities." *Emory Law Journal* 57: 1011-1048.
- Summers, Clyde. 2000. "From industrial democracy to union democracy." *Journal of Labor Research* 21(1): 3-14.
- Tilly, Charles. *Democracy*. 2007. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tilly, Chris. 2011a. "Defending the equalizers: Why unions matter." *Progressive Planning*, Spring 2011.
- Tilly, Chris. 2011b. "The impact of the economic crisis on international migration: A review." *Work, Employment and Society* 25(4), 2011.
- Tilly, Chris. 2011c. "An opportunity not taken...yet: U.S. labor and the current economic crisis." *WorkingUSA* 14: 73-85, 2011.
- Tilly, Chris. 2009. Beyond "contratos de protección": Strong and weak unionism in Mexican retail enterprises. Working Paper 2009-20, UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment.
- Tilly, Chris. 2006. "Labor market inequality, past and future: A perspective from the United States." In Lena Gönas and Jan Carlsson, *Divisions of Gender and Work*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2006.
- Tilly, Chris and José Luis Álvarez Galván. 2006. "The Mexican retail sector in the age of globalization: Lousy jobs, invisible unions." *International Labor and Working Class History* 70(1): 1-25.
- Tilly, Chris and Marie Kennedy. "Dreams and borders: Looking at migration from the Mexican side." *Dollars & Sense* November/December 2007.
- United Workers Congress. 2012. Website, <http://www.excludedworkerscongress.org/> . Last consulted 14 November 2012.
- Urofsky, Melvin I. 2005. *Money and Free Speech : Campaign Finance Reform and the Courts*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas.

Voss, Kim. 2010. "Democratic dilemmas: union democracy and union renewal." *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research* 16: 369-382.

Waldinger, Roger, Chris Erickson, Ruth Milkman, Daniel J. B. Mitchell, Abel Valenzuela, Kent Wong, and Maurice Zeitlin. 1998. "Helots no more: A case study of the justice for janitors campaign in Los Angeles." In *Organizing to Win*, eds. Kate Bronfenbrenner, Sheldon Friedman, Richard W. Hurd, Rudolph A. Oswald, and Ronald L. Seeber, 102-49. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Webb, Sidney and Beatrice Webb. 1965: [1897]. *Industrial Democracy*. New York: A.M. Kelley.

Western, Bruce. 2006. *Punishment and Inequality in America*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Western, Bruce and Jake Rosenfeld. 2011. "Unions, norms, and the rise in U.S. wage inequality." *American Sociological Review* 76(4): 513-537

Youn, Monica. 2011. *Money, Politics, and the Constitution: Beyond Citizens United*. Washington, DC: The Century Foundation.

Zazueta, César and Ricardo de la Peña. 1981. *Estructura Dual y Piramidal del Sindicalismo Mexicano*. Mexico City: Secretaría del Trabajo y Previsión Social, Centro Nacional de Información y Estadísticas del Trabajo.

Zieger, Robert H. 2007. *For Jobs and Freedom: Race and Labor in America since 1865*. Lexington : University Press of Kentucky.