



Occupational Health and Labor Unions

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Received: 27 May 2025 / Revised: 27 May 2025 / Accepted: 29 May 2025 /
Published online: 19 June 2025
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Abstract

The resurgence of labor unions in the U.S., evidenced by recent unionization successes across various industries, reflects a broader revival of organized labor's role in workplace advocacy. These developments counter a long-term decline in union membership, with global efforts also seeing modest gains. As is demonstrated in this series of contributions, labor unions remain critical in promoting occupational health and safety, mitigating workplace hazards, and addressing psychosocial risks such as stress and harassment. Historically, unions have shaped labor standards and influenced the development of safety regulations. Today, they contribute to broader societal benefits, including democratic participation, workplace well-being, and public health innovation. Despite their significant contributions, unions face challenges from globalization, technological changes, the rise of non-standard work arrangements, and political polarization. Despite the critical role unions play in occupational health and organizations more generally, organizational scientists have paid relatively little attention to unions. In response, this series of contributions highlights the need for renewed scholarly attention, particularly in industrial-organizational psychology, to support unions in safeguarding workers' rights and well-being.

Keywords Unions · Occupational health · Occupational safety · Labor relations

Introduction

Denise Vesper & Michael J. Zickar

“When union wages go up, everyone’s wages go up. When union workplaces are safer, all workplaces are safer. And when unions are strong, America is strong” (Vice President Kamala Harris, August 5, 2024, post on Facebook)

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With this social media post in August 2024, Vice President Kamala Harris reacted to recent developments in the United States that suggest that the labor movement is experiencing a resurgence. There have been significant victories for labor unions such as the 2024 vote to unionize in the VW plant in Chattanooga Tennessee, a major victory for the United Auto Workers union in a region of the country typically hostile to organized labor (Krisher & Hall, 2024). In addition, the massive coffee chain Starbucks has had 590 locations successively unionized as of 5/19/2025 (an 82% success rate - with 106 locations rejecting unionization in a formal vote; for data see <https://unionelections.org/data/starbucks/>), thus opening up a new segment of the American workforce as friendly to organized labor (Greenhouse, 2024). In VP Harris's post, she thus acknowledged that unions play a vital role, not only for workers but also for organizations and society. The vote for unionization at the VW plant in Chattanooga thereby represents one further step to the revitalization of old types of unions such as the United Auto Workers (UAW). In contrast, the unionization efforts at Starbucks highlight that new sectors are also thriving for representation. They are, however, just two examples of the recent upsurge in labor union membership and fights for unionization in the US.

These victories give pro-labor activists much-needed hope, as the labor movement has shrunk significantly over the years. For example, in 1983, 20.1% of the US workforce belonged to a labor union, whereas only 10% of the US workforce was unionized in 2023 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024). The percentage of private sector employees belonging to a union was only 6.0% in 2023. In other parts of the world, labor unions are also experiencing resurgences in membership for the first time in years, such as the service sector union *ver.di* in Germany (Eurofound, 2019) and also in Australia where young people are driving a growth in union membership (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024). The International Labor Organization (ILO) reports that labor union membership has globally increased by 3.6% over the past decade (Andre, 2023). However, it is still lower than a decade ago (Eurofound, 2019).

As a result of these developments, labor unions are once again receiving more attention and their role in the workplace is becoming stronger again. As a result, their influence on issues such as occupational health and safety is becoming more pronounced. This can also be seen in the latest call from the International Trade Union Confederation (2024) to incorporate trade unions into discussion on how to deal with increasing heat stress on workers to ensure safe working conditions. Traditionally, labor union contracts have established important regulations regarding limits on working hours and protection from workplace hazards (Hagedorn et al., 2016). Furthermore, unions are also important regarding other health-related factors such as harassment. For example, a study among union women has shown that the negative association between harassment and negative health was weaker when tolerance for harassment was low, and union support was high (Mellor & Golay, 2014). Hence, unions can help to reduce negative health outcomes and prevent harassment at the workplace by providing their members with necessary support (see also Mellor & Golay, 2015). National trade union density was also found to contribute to the enterprise-level psychosocial safety climate over and above the effects of national policies (Potter et al., 2024). It is thus important to consider support by collective

action in addition to introducing legislation on occupational health and safety. At a time when between 30 and 40 percent of U.S. workers are exposed to occupational psychosocial hazards such as high time pressure, low wages, and high emotional labor (Stephan-Recaido et al., 2024), unions are even more needed to reduce the negative effects on workers.

In addition to these workplace-related aspects, labor unions also promote democratic participation and a sense of community among workers. Therefore, it has been argued that labor union contracts could also be helpful for public health innovation (Hagedorn et al., 2016). This was seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, when labor unions negotiated protective measures for frontline workers, with a particular focus on occupational health and safety (Andre, 2023). In addition to helping improve occupational health, union members across demographic groups reported being more satisfied with their lives compared to non-members (Flavin & Shufeldt, 2016). Unions can thus contribute to workers' well-being in- and outside of the workplace.

In Europe, the role of union safety representatives is just that: To promote a satisfactory working environment and protection from occupational hazards (Walters & Wadsworth, 2017). As such, trade unions play a key role in promoting occupational health and safety in certain industries, such as mining (Vesper et al., 2024). This has also been supported by analyses from Nichols et al. (2007), who observed that union involvement improved workplace health and safety provisions in that unionized workplaces have more robust accident-reporting systems. Additionally, unions help to introduce health and safety committees which function as channels for complaints regarding unsafe working practices and help secure compensation if work-related injuries are suffered (Fenn & Ashby, 2004).

Historically, unions have fought with governments and employers not only about wage issues but also regarding safety issues (Creighton & Micallef, 1983). Since the advent of the modern labor movement, the improvement in working conditions has been one of the top priorities for unions and has led to a considerable decrease in work-related accidents (International Labour Organization, 2002). The unions in these fights often demanded statutory intervention for the regulation of unsafe working conditions. Especially the struggles of the British mining and textile unions in the nineteenth century formed legislation that is retained, in only slightly modified forms, still today. Unions were also key players in the introduction of institutions such as the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) in Great Britain (Nowak, 2015). In fact, HSE's stress management standards are acknowledged to be the most effective way to deal with work-related stress (Eurofound & EU-OSHA, 2014). However, unions have demanded to be involved in introducing such standards throughout the process. The Healthy Work Campaign in the US similarly includes representatives from organized labor and academia to provide tools for organizations to assess and improve working conditions as well as to help influence public policy and opinion (see <https://www.healthywork.org/>).

Despite these successes, there are still many issues that need to be addressed by unions and employers to ensure safe and healthy work globally. As workers are increasingly faced with work-related psychosocial hazards that have negative consequences for themselves, their organizations, and their communities (Schulte et al., 2024), both trade unions and scholars should take action to address these challenges.

One example is organizational change which is caused by factors such as globalization or technological developments and associated with increases in psychosocial risks and a deterioration of mental health among workers (Backhaus et al., 2024). However, workplace support could be one potential buffering factor reducing the effect of poor working conditions on health (Backhaus et al., 2023). Implementing corresponding interventions to increase support and improve conditions can only be successful when unions as workforce representatives and employers cooperate and scholars such as organizational scientists provide valid scientific evidence.

Despite this continually important role of trade unions in occupational health and safety and the increasing experience of hazardous working conditions, social scientists, occupational health psychologists and, in particular their intellectual cousins industrial organizational psychologists have neglected labor unions in their research (see Vesper et al., 2024; Zickar, 2004). This neglect is evident in the fact that between the 1960 s and 2007, less than two percent of the articles published in the top two journals of I-O psychology (i.e., *Journal of Applied Psychology* and *Personnel Psychology*) mentioned labor relations (Cascio & Aguinis, 2008). Another example is the recent literature review on burnout in organizations by Demerouti and Adaloudis (2024) which provides an overview of existing research on the causes and consequences of burnout as well as interventions. In their discussion the authors argue that a more holistic approach is needed to reduce burnout among workers, but neither they nor the included studies mentioned unions as relevant actors to help change organizational causes of burnout. Lott (2014) similarly highlighted this lack of interest in labor unions, even though they provided a voice for the American working class. Furthermore, labor relations and labor unions have been and remain a blind spot in the teaching of organizational science, as almost no textbooks mention them (Barling, 1988; Lott, 2014). Thus, it has been summarized by Carriere (2020) that labor movements have been severely understudied in organizational sciences. This also explains why several researchers have recently called for a renewal of union psychology research (Carriere, 2020) and to bring unions (back) to the organizational sciences table (Vesper et al., 2024). This call to action is consistent with the stated mission of the Society for I-O Psychology (SIOP) to promote human welfare through the various applications of psychology to all types of organizations as well as to the mission of the Society for Occupational Health Psychology to promote psychological research on significant practical and theoretical questions related to occupational health.

In this series of contributions, we highlight and describe various aspects of the impact of labor unions on occupational health and safety. The experts reference several areas where union efforts intersect with occupational health and safety. O'Brien et al. describe existing health and safety risks for workers such as the still-existing threat of asbestos and chemicals, but also mental health-related factors such as time pressure. They highlight how unions have helped to reduce these risks for workers and emphasize ongoing union efforts to further reduce these health and safety risks. Fletcher and Stephenson focus on a recent development in the United States: changes in child labor laws and the subsequent increase in child employment. They summarize the legislation, explain how unions are involved in preventing hazards related to child labor, and propose several avenues for future research. Ahr and Jost

describe existing efforts taken by organized labor to reduce risks to health and safety. They thereby place their focus on Germany as one of the biggest economies worldwide and show historical as well as on-going developments. Somerville and Barling identify four developments in the modern workplace that require further research by organizational scholars and greater collaboration with unions. These developments include the rise in non-standardized work, climate change, “mega-threats,” and artificial intelligence. They discuss how each of these areas relates to unions and occupational health, and they suggest directions for future research.

Conclusions

We hope that this work encourages occupational health researchers to consider working with organized labor in both research on occupational health issues as well as considering them as partners and allies in practice efforts. Labor unions are performing innovative work in helping address occupational health and safety issues throughout the world as well as playing an important role in providing checks and balances in a workplace that faces new and unprecedented challenges, such as climate change and AI, at a time when many countries are reluctant to enact more regulations. Organized labor is experiencing a resurgence that has important implications for the future of work.

A Rights-Based Approach for Work Health and Safety: Why Unions are Critical for Securing a Healthy and Safe Working Environment

Liam O’Brien, Rory O’Neill, Maureen Dollard, & Kevin Flynn

Background

In 2023 the ILO estimated that nearly 3 million workers died every year from work-related accidents and disease, an increase of more than 5% since 2015 (International Labour Organization, 2023). Whilst undoubtedly an underestimate of work-related fatalities it underscores a disturbing trend that workers are increasingly exposed to hazards that cause illness, injury, and premature death. Just 12 months prior the same UN agency amended, for the first time, its landmark 1998 Declaration on the Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work to include the right to a safe and healthy working environment as the fifth fundamental human right. This bold declaration to the world highlighted not only the importance of workers’ health but emphasized the need for a rights-based approach that enabled workers, through their unions, to organize and secure a healthy and safe working environment.

The history of work is littered with stories of struggle for the right to be safe at work. From the fights to ban asbestos (APHEDA, 2020), and other hazardous chemicals (e.g., ITUC, 2019), to the ongoing battle for recognition of workplace mental health (e.g., Australian Council of Trade Unions, 2021b), the dynamics

between workers and employers determine all aspects of work relations, including our health. These dynamics are critical in explaining how one's right to a safe and healthy working environment is only as good as one's ability to exercise and defend that right collectively through their union. It underscores the fact that the fundamental right to a safe and healthy working environment does not exist in isolation, but is supported and enabled by other fundamental rights, such as the right to organize and collectively bargain, and highlights the fundamental importance of unions in securing worker's health and safety.

This contribution will explore this important relationship from the perspective of unionists who have practiced, organized, and studied occupational health and safety. It will consider some of the historical achievements of our movement and will focus on some of the immediate and future challenges presented in relation to asbestos, chemicals, mental health, and psychosocial factors highlighting both the industrial and political efforts of unions to secure safer work. In doing so we will not only argue that the reduction and elimination of work-related illness, injury, and death will only occur through the promotion of a rights-based approach that develops and maintains policies that build worker power and strengthen unions but it will reinforce the importance of unions as agents for public health.

Asbestos

To date, there is no greater work-related exposure that causes death than that of asbestos which claims more than 220,000 lives annually, more than 1 in 15 work-related fatalities (Institute for Health Metrics & Evaluation, 2024). Unions have a long history of campaigning to identify the risks associated with and end the use of asbestos products using both political and industrial efforts (APHEDA, 2020). From as early as the beginning of the last century, unions and public health activists have identified asbestos as a workplace hazard and undertaken workplace actions to eliminate, control, and minimize exposures. These efforts evolved into political campaigns to end the use of asbestos-containing materials that now see asbestos being banned in more than 60 countries (APHEDA, 2020).

Despite these bans, the fight to end the trade and use of asbestos continues today with unionists throughout Asia inching their way closer to bans (APHEDA, 2020). With more than 1 million tons still used annually in countries such as Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Indonesia workers will continue to suffer the consequences of asbestos for many generations to come. However, if it were not for unions in these countries, supported by those in developed countries, this horror would persist. These efforts draw upon the industrial and political efforts of trade unions and highlight the importance of unions as agents for broader public health intervention. To this end, unions enable workers to exercise collective strength in workplaces to identify and control risks through asbestos ban campaigns. However, their efforts extend beyond workplaces and sectors in developing social and political movements seeking a complete eradication of asbestos across society

and throughout the world (APHEDA, 2020) to protect both worker and public health.

Chemicals

The workplace is where hazardous chemicals start and end their journey – from extraction to processing, to manufacture, use, and disposal. The biggest and frequently most damaging exposures are in the workplace, an officially sanctioned form of collateral damage codified in occupational exposure standards which are typically orders of magnitude higher than environmental exposure limits. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates more than 1 billion workers are exposed to hazardous substances, including pollutants, dusts, vapors, and fumes, each year causing the deaths of more than 1 million of these workers. It is a situation that could get considerably worse (International Labour Organization, 2024).

The chemical industry is set to double in size by 2030, with a 2019 Global Chemicals Outlook policy briefing from the Executive Director of UN Environment noting if we [unions, UN Environment, and others] continue to allow the mismanagement of chemicals and waste worldwide this will “increase exposures, concentrations and adverse health and environmental impacts” (United Nations Environment Programme, 2019). The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) further noted that “the chemical industry is one of the largest industrial sectors in the world and is expected to grow four-fold by 2060” with annual sales rising from US\$5.7 trillion in 2017 to US\$21.7 trillion by 2060 (OECD, 2019).

Workers are the guinea pigs, lab rats, and canaries in the mine that have revealed the deadly price of hazardous chemical use. Most of the group 1 and 2a carcinogens recognized by the UN’s International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) were identified in studies in the workplace (see also Lißner et al., 2014). The human price of these exposures is one occupational cancer death every 52 s.

Importantly, chemical exposures are not the preserve of smoke-stack industries. Nurses, cleaners, firefighters, construction workers, agricultural workers – just about every job presents a risk of chemical-related occupational disease and disability. Women are under-represented in these totals, because they have been either dismissed as ‘variables’ in the epidemiology, or their exposures have been under-studied or ignored. Reporting is often linked to payment of state benefits or successful compensation claims which grossly underestimate the rate of exposure, injury, illness, and death. Disability thresholds and employers routinely contesting claims mean that both justice and the body count are casualties.

A rare study of occupational hazards and ovarian cancer has found new evidence that many common jobs undertaken by women are associated with an elevated risk (Leung et al., 2023). After accounting for other risk factors, calculations using the Canadian job-exposure matrix (CANJEM) confirmed that working for 10 or more years as a hairdresser, barber, beautician, and in related roles was associated with a three-fold higher risk of ovarian cancer.

There is also a stark division of risks between rich and poor nations. In July 2020, the UN Special Rapporteur on toxics and human rights, in a statement endorsed by 35 fellow experts of the Human Rights Council, condemned the practice of wealthy states exporting their banned toxic chemicals to poorer nations lacking the capacity to control the risks (UN-OHCHR, 2020). Calling for the “deplorable” practice to end, the statement noted at least 30 states exported hazardous substances that had been banned locally because of health and environmental reasons to Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

It is a problem that has been compounded by an industry strategy that succeeded in putting a brake on the development of tighter chemical exposure standards (Cann & Balanyá, 2019). Even where they are introduced, improvements are delayed, frustrated, and diluted during the standard-setting process. This doubt-deny-and-delay exercise has been repeated for benzene (Lombardi, 2014), silica (O’Neill, 2014), chromium, beryllium, and a litany of other causes (Michaels, 2008) of serious occupational diseases, including cancer.

The re-emergence of ‘old’ occupational diseases like silicosis (Hoy et al., 2018) and black lung (Graber et al., 2016) – a lung-shredding condition now striking faster and more viciously in the US (Blackley et al., 2018) and among Australian (Zosky et al., 2016) stonemasons and coal miners – suggests progress in even the wealthiest nations may have been sickeningly reversed. While union campaigns in both countries have secured safer exposure standards, eliminated the most hazardous products and introduced stronger regulations, pressure from the industry lobby and regulatory torpor have seen the great majority of countries stick with standards at least six times more deadly for silicosis and with a risk of lung cancer elevated by 40 percent (O’Neill, 2024).

Unions have always been workers’ best line of defense from chemicals. Whether it was through securing improved legislation, or through other union strategies – work refusals, boycotts, industrial action, or negotiation through collective bargaining or on safety committees – unions have acted early, ahead of the law and ahead of industry admissions of a problem. As outlined previously, unions recognized the risks posed by asbestos and introduced their own no-asbestos policies. They warned of the neurotoxic, cancer, and other risks from organic solvents in the print, construction, textiles, and footwear sectors, securing better controls and safer substitutes. Refusals to work with asthmagens like TDI and MDI in construction materials, paints, and glues and carcinogens like azodyes and vinyl chloride protected workers from serious and potentially deadly diseases. This union safety effect is pronounced and could be the single most effective intervention at work reinforcing that a rights-based framework supported by unions is essential to harm reduction.

Protecting workers from acute and chronic harm from chemical exposures remains a trade union priority. ‘Taking control—removing dangerous substances from the workplace’ (ITUC, 2019), a campaign launched in 2019 by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), highlighted measures unions could take to identify and challenge preventable and potentially deadly exposures. One theme was a ‘Zero Cancer’ approach, urging reps to seek to eliminate or minimize exposure to carcinogens in the workplace.

Unions played a prominent role in the multi-year negotiations of the UN's Global Framework on Chemicals (United Nations Environment Programme, 2024), finalized in September 2023. The framework includes language requiring respect and promotion of International Labour Organisation (ILO) labor rights and safety conventions. Human rights language and language on supply chain responsibilities are there because unions fought for them. It is a template for better practice worldwide.

As previously mentioned, occupational health and safety have now been recognized as an ILO fundamental principle and right at work – so core safety conventions are binding on all the UN body's 187 member states. Convention 155, the Occupational Safety and Health Convention, and its associated recommendation 164 are a charter of worker and union rights and require member states and employers to protect workers from all workplace risks, including chemicals. This achievement was secured as a direct consequence of a global trade union campaign (ITUC, 2022) and ensures that wherever you work, and regardless of national law, all workers have the right to refuse work that presents an imminent risk without fear of victimization. They have a right to union representation at work, the right to be consulted about how work is organized, and a right to information on the risks posed by the jobs they do and the substances they use.

Unions intend to secure significant additional chemical-specific improvements when an ILO protocol on chemicals, to supplement the current chemicals convention C170, is negotiated in 2027/28. But paper rights protect no one, which is why the presence of active, informed, and organized trade unions (Hazards Magazine, 2024) is critical to chemical health and safety. Unions organize from the workplace to the region to globally and collaborate on cross-border campaigns to stop the export of hazards, whether that is asbestos, chemicals or pesticides. Knowledge and experience are shared, so when Australian unions won a ban on deadly engineered stone and tighter occupational exposure standards for silica, it made sure its sister organizations worldwide knew what it did and how. Building this capacity and cooperation through training, campaigns, and organization is how unions prepare for a bigger, fast-evolving, and left-to-its-own-devices inherently hazardous industry.

Mental Health

Similar trade union efforts are observed in relation to psychosocial factors which now predominate the world of work in many industrialized and developing countries. The changing nature of work has seen a shift away from 'routine physical occupations' toward 'non-routine cognitive occupations', coupled with a corresponding work intensification, which has resulted in alarming rates of exposure to psychosocial hazards along with increasing rates of work-related mental ill health, including suicide. In many countries, this has now reached epidemic proportions with psychological injury and illness. In Australia 1 in 5 workers report experiencing work-related mental ill health (Australian Council of Trade

Unions, 2023), and in Europe nearly 9 in 10 (88%) of workplaces report psychosocial risks as commonplace (Swenneke et al., 2018).

Australia

Unions have responded by exercising both industrial and political leverage to combat this epidemic. In many developed countries, such as Australia, unions have campaigned to close legislative gaps to enhance rights and ensure greater protection of workers' mental health. Whilst occupational health and safety frameworks have generally provided duties to ensure both physical and psychological health, legislative standards, regulations, and codes have focused exclusively on physical health leaving workers' mental health largely unprotected. The development and implementation of enforceable standards marks a significant shift toward ensuring worker mental health is protected. These standards, won by unions, provide not only strengthened duties to protect psychological health but set out a charter of organizing rights for workers and their unions to pursue changes to job design in an effort to implement higher-order controls.

Unions are now advancing these rights through campaigns in workplaces to raise worker awareness of psychosocial risks and drive job change and empower workers. Through education and the provision of risk assessment tools. Unions are at the forefront of combatting work-related mental illness and improving decent work (Australian Council of Trade Unions, 2021b). These efforts combined with national campaigns to reduce insecure work (Australian Council of Trade Unions, 2021a), a key psychosocial risk, illustrate how unions are combining industrial and occupational health campaigns to improve workers' mental health.

Europe

Similar, albeit slow, progress can be observed in Europe which has long prided itself on being a global regulatory force (see former Competition Commissioner Thierry Breton's running feud with Elon Musk as one example), with the "Brussels effect" one surefire way of maintaining international relevance for the European Union. Despite this tradition, high levels of collective bargaining coverage, and the presence of strong trade unions throughout the continent, Europe is no longer the global leader it professes to be in occupational health and safety. The European's lagging behind their global counterparts is most evident in their approach to workplace mental health provisions, with trade unions consistently calling for adequate protection.

Data collected in 2022 (Countouris et al., 2023) (and seeking to create a comparison with pre-pandemic statistics) showed that 44% of European workers detail how they are exposed to severe time pressure or work overload, while 66% of workers have experienced health problems caused or made worse by their work. Compared to pre-COVID figures, this data showed a 25% increase in the prevalence of psychosocial risks in workplaces (Irastorza & European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA), 2019).

Despite the obvious need to tackle this issue, employers' groups and the European Commission point to the 1989 Framework Directive ("The employer shall take the measures necessary for the safety and health protection of workers, including prevention of occupational risks and provision of information and training, as well as provision of the necessary organization and means") as justification for inactivity. Supported by two non-binding agreements, a sectoral directive and the directive on work with display screen directive, this is the full arsenal available to workers looking for improved prevention of workplace mental health risks.

Poor implementation and only an implicit reference to psychosocial risks mean that this 1989 text does not provide adequate protection against many modern workplace threats. What has become clear is that concrete action is needed to address the root causes of psychosocial risks. Non-binding provisions have enabled employers to fail to implement prevention measures and often do not address systemic issues in work organizations. On three occasions during the last mandate, the European Parliament requested a legislative initiative, which the Commission failed to deliver. With competitiveness and deregulation, a popular political mantra currently in Europe, the necessary action is not guaranteed.

For European workers, to ensure they receive adequate protection throughout the EU, wherever they may work, European-level action must be a priority for the Commission. While some employers take proactive action against psychosocial risks, unequal protection cannot be a staple of working life, with EU-wide action a clear course of action given that 89% of employers say they tackle health and safety due to their legal obligations (European Agency for Safety & Health at Work, 2024).

Empirically, research shows that across 31 European countries, those with higher union density have organizations reporting higher levels of protection from psychosocial risks (higher levels of psychosocial safety climate- PSC), better worker health, and stronger GDP (Dollard & Nesar, 2013). Further evidence shows that of all national policy approaches, legally mandated provisions to protect mental health are most strongly related to organizational PSC across countries (Potter et al., 2024). Importantly union density is significantly related to PSC over and above the effects of the law, implying that unions have a powerful role in maintaining health and safety alongside the law, a crucial role since regulations may take time to take effect, and not all companies are lawful.

Through the EndStress platform (endstress.eu), led by Eurocadres, the union for European professionals and managers, over 50 organizations have joined and pushed for action in line with what we have seen in Australia. With inroads being made, the issue of work-related psychosocial risks/hazards is now on the political agenda, with momentum behind Eurocadres' call. Taking inspiration from the work of their Australian counterparts, European unions are hoping that the "Brussels effect" can regain its status as a global regulatory force, delivering equal protection of workers' mental health.

Conclusion

The right to a safe and healthy working environment will not be achieved by simply relying on employers becoming more benevolent or health and safety regulators more diligent. It is only through the respect and promotion of a rights-based approach that illness, injury, and death will ultimately be eliminated from the world of work. Unions are critical in ensuring workers have agency at work and across society. Not only do they build collective strength in workplaces to combat employer power and control hazards, they foster solidarity across sectors, regions, and globally in mobilizing industrial and political pressure to force social change. Thus, unions will have a critical role in lobbying for the future of occupational health, especially with regard to current developments in the US, where most of the workforce of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health was laid off. This is no more evident than in the current battle of our movement globally to advance and implement strengthened rights to mentally safe and healthy work.

The Intersection of Child Employment, Child Labor Laws, and Union Activity

Keaton A. Fletcher & Kendall Stephenson

The impacts and nature of child employment have been relatively underexplored in the organizational sciences (Fletcher, 2024), despite a significant proportion of minors experiencing paid employment broadly. Roughly 1/3 of teens in the U.S. were employed in some capacity as of 2021 (Desilver, 2022), including those engaged in child labor, which is defined as work that threatens the safety, health, or development of the working minor. Further, estimates suggest that 160 million children worldwide are engaged in child labor (UNICEF/ILO, 2021). In the United States, the largest economy, several laws have been proposed and/or enacted that may increase the employment and hazards experienced by minors (Mast, 2024a). We argue that this shift in the legislative backdrop of child employment necessarily impacts labor unions and raises key questions that must be addressed to ensure the safety and wellbeing of minors, topics that should be more fully considered by OHP researchers.

Legislation Review

The major US federal law governing child labor standards is the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (FLSA). The FLSA prohibits children under eighteen from working in certain industries declared hazardous, as well as those under age sixteen from working in mining or manufacturing. The FLSA also stipulates that 14- and 15-year-olds can be employed for limited time periods outside of school hours. Although no child under 14 is generally permitted to be employed in a non-agricultural job, children as young as 12 can legally work in agriculture with parental consent. Many

states have additional protections for minors above and beyond the FLSA, but recent years have seen a push to roll these back.

The Economic Policy Institute has found that as of May 30, 2024, 31 states have introduced bills to weaken child labor protections since 2021, with 16 successfully enacting laws (EPI, 2024). Broadly, these bills fall into three categories: increasing economic incentives for employing children, decreasing oversight of working conditions, and those that increase minors' exposure to workplace hazards.

The first category of bills and laws is aimed at increasing the share of labor hours worked by minors while lowering their cost. For example, in Iowa, a recent law extended the times and number of hours within a day 14- and 15-year-olds can work and removed any special hours-based regulations for 16- and 17-year-olds (IA SF542, 2023). Similar laws have passed in Indiana (IN SB146, 2024) and Florida (FL HB49/SB1596, 2024). Other bills included in this category establish a subminimum wage for minors where none previously existed. Although 41 states and the District of Columbia already have subminimum wage laws for minors (e.g., minors can be paid \$4.25 per hour for the first 90 days of employment or are exempted from state-level minimum wage laws; Mast, 2024b), five states introduced bills designed to create new sub-minimum wages for minors (none have been enacted).

The second category includes bills that reduce oversight of minors' working conditions, such as removing work permit requirements. For instance, Alabama no longer requires 14–16-year-olds to obtain a certificate ensuring their academic standing, instead requiring parental notification to the school (AL SB53, 2024). Arkansas removed the requirement for their Division of Labor to verify the age, work description, schedule, and parental consent of 14–16-year-olds (AR Act 195, 2023).

The third category includes bills that may increase exposure to workplace hazards. Some in this category lift regulations preventing minors from working in hazardous *occupations* (e.g., construction), instead preventing only specific hazardous *activities* (e.g., operating machinery). Others in this category remove age restrictions on who can serve alcohol, which raises the risk of alcohol-related harassment (e.g., Lund et al., 2023). Given power imbalances (e.g., Breslin et al., 2007; Morrison et al., 2015; Turner et al., 2022) and minors' lower self-regulation (e.g., Steinberg et al., 2018), it is likely they will engage in hazardous tasks once exposed, despite legal prohibitions.

Together, these laws increase minors' presence in the workforce at lower pay and with fewer protections. As minors are likely to have limited knowledge of the laws that protect them and limited agency to seek out help when violations occur, this not only poses risks to minors, increasing the chance of child labor, but also undermines adult workers by creating a larger pool of alternative (and cheaper) labor.

Affected Industries and Labor Unions

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, of the roughly 6.3 million employed teenagers in the country, 2.4 million work in service and sales, and 1.5 million in office occupations. The National Agricultural Workers Survey (Gabbard et al., 2014) estimates that 84,000 14–18-year-olds work on U.S. crop farms annually, with 74%

being recent arrivals to the country. Additionally, many migrant children work illegally in industries like meat processing, roofing, and construction (e.g., Dreier, 2023).

Given this distribution of employment, minors in the U.S. are most likely to encounter a union through their schooling. One-third of those employed in education, training, and library occupations are union members. Comparatively, only 9% of employees in service occupations were members of a union in 2023, three percentage points higher than those employed in sales and office occupations (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024). However, some industries with a known union presence (e.g., meat packing, roofing, construction) may be equipped to organize to protect young workers from the worst forms of child labor, despite the lower rates of minor employment in these industries. Indeed, unions can, and have, taken steps to address child labor.

Implications and Research Questions

Historically, child labor was seen as a threat to adult job security and wages, leading organized labor to support its restriction and elimination. Today, rising child employment, including hazardous work, will likely affect the strength and operations of various labor unions. Below, we outline practical implications and related research questions.

All unions, especially in affected industries, must include children's rights in their advocacy, and many already do. The American Federation of Labor—Congress of Industrial Organizations reconfirmed its stance on child labor, offering recommendations for the federal government, such as raising wages, removing agriculture's exclusion from labor laws, strengthening organizing rights, increasing enforcement, and supporting citizenship pathways (AFL-CIO, 2023). The Child Labor Coalition, formed by the National Consumers League and the American Federation of Teachers, conducts research, testifies, comments on regulations, hosts conferences, and distributes educational materials. Other unions have taken action at the bargaining table. For example, in Minnesota, Local 663 of the United Food and Commercial Workers proposed a "child wellbeing fund" (Stager, 2024). This proposal, funded by employer contributions, would generate a reserve fund used to support children and families in the community. Some unions have also raised alarms about child labor law rollbacks; for instance, two labor union associations organized a roundtable to discuss legislative changes in Iowa (Barton, 2024).

We propose additional stances unions can take. Some industries, like construction, should advocate for a complete ban on child employment in their industry due to inherent hazards. Others should promote responsible employment with strong safeguards to ensure safe and developmentally appropriate work for minors. Unions might also push for equal pay for minors, increased safety regulations, and expanded social welfare programs (e.g., free school meals, after-school programs, free advanced education). Public-facing unions, like those in education, can identify and report unlawful child labor and educate the community on its developmental

harms. Researchers should focus on identifying the best social and economic strategies to protect minors and prevent child employment from turning into child labor.

Second, unions should include minors in all industries to ensure their protection, even as some industries aim to remove minors from the workforce. However, this initiative raises key considerations. For example, it is recognized that youth tend to have little exposure to, and knowledge of, unions and that this serves as a barrier to joining unions (e.g., Cha et al., 2019; Tailby & Pollert, 2011). Union leadership may have significant power differentials when interacting with minors, so unions must educate and recruit minors without exerting undue influence, respecting their age limitations. The APA code of ethics (e.g., parental consent and minor assent) could serve as a guideline in this process. Specifically, we point toward parental education and involvement as critical, given that parents' attitudes towards unions are a strong predictor of youths' attitudes (Kelloway & Watts, 1994). Minors may, however, also be vulnerable to anti-union consultants, and unions should advocate for legislation protecting them from all undue influence. Researchers should explore these power dynamics and strategies to mitigate them, especially when minors also belong to other disempowered groups (e.g., migrants, disabled individuals, low-income, racial/ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+).

Third, there are significant social implications for including minors in unions. Researchers and union leaders must consider the effects of adults and minors working or advocating together. How are union conflicts handled when one party is a minor? How are minors perceived by their adult coworkers? What are the long-term effects for minors who were in a union, such as pro-union attitudes, self-efficacy, or access to training and development? Do approaches to organize workforces with non-trivial numbers of child workers differ from other organizing approaches?

Concluding Remarks

We hope that this contribution has made clear that the U.S. workforce is facing a potential increase in child employment and labor, and that this necessarily impacts U.S. unions. Moreover, these changes must be addressed by both unions and researchers alike to ensure safe and dignified work for both minors and adults.

Documenting Existing Efforts by Organized Labour, Particularly Focusing on Occupational Health

Timo Ahr & Alexander Jost

The world of work is changing rapidly: digitalization, artificial intelligence, new forms of work, and the crises of recent years are driving massive change processes in companies and public institutions. The working environment is constantly changing

due to the ecological and economic transformation. These interests and changes have different dimensions. To ensure that economic and ecological interests are not the sole focus, it is necessary to place greater emphasis on social interests. Trade unions within the German Trade Union Federation (Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, DGB), as well as employee representatives within companies, play a crucial role in this effort. Their sphere of influence ranges from specific cases in local company structures according to Sec. 87 subsec. 1 No. 7 Works Constitution Act (BetrVG) to overarching political and parliamentary work.

Trade Unions Keep an Overview – in the Workplace and in Politics

Trade unions and co-determination bodies actively shape the framework conditions for employees at various levels in a positive way. In particular, occupational health and safety play a particularly important role in international competition (Donado & Wälde, 2012). Which benchmark is set as the target to be achieved depends largely on how strongly trade unions fight or are able to fight for the rights of employees. At a time in which the terms deregulation and bureaucracy reduction are not used synonymously, we run the risk that capitalist forces will always focus on efficiency without keeping an eye on the social component and human costs of capitalist activities. In an economic system designed for efficiency and cost reduction, trade unions play a crucial role in securing occupational health and safety for employees through concrete demands towards employers. In addition, platform work, AI, and changes among so-called ‘blue-collar workers’ (industrial workers and tradespeople, primarily employed in production and typically engaged in blue collar occupations) are driving transformations. While technological advancements often focus on ‘white-collar workers’ (employees in office or administrative roles), who are typically the first to integrate new technologies into their daily tasks, conventional jobs are not always automatically reassessed. Although significant progress has been made in highlighting mental illnesses such as burnout and depression in the field of occupational health and safety, it must remain the duty of trade unions to address and mitigate all forms of stress factors by all of their efforts to protect and promote worker safety health and well-being.

Trade unions serve as a guarantee that occupational health and safety are enforced not only through legal regulations but also at the political level within workplaces. The efforts of trade unions have always been and continue to be driven by the aim of ensuring a decent life for employees, with dignity, good health, fair wages, and adequate pensions. Through social policy demands and influence at various political levels, trade unions have successfully built a modern social security system over the decades, one that is oriented toward the well-being of employees. This system is continually adapted through the daily work of trade unions within the social insurance system to benefit employees. The very fact that insured individuals have a say in the self-governing bodies of all branches of social insurance—incidentally, on an equal footing with employers—demonstrates the great success achieved by previous generations (DGB, 2024a).

The ongoing political presence of occupational health and safety in all its aspects is also reflected in the work of trade unions within professional associations and other political levels. Workplace representatives from trade unions and co-determination

bodies act as experts from within the industry, highlighting challenges in the context of occupational health and safety. They advocate for better working conditions and increased protection for employees (DGB, [2024a](#)).

Important Social Policy Achievements – From Then to Now

The entitlement to continued wage payments in case of illness was secured by the German Metalworkers union IG Metall in 1956 and 1957 after a 114-day strike, despite political and neoliberal resistance. This represents a crucial social and health policy success of the trade union movement, which remains a fundamental consensus between labor and health policy today (IG Met al. &1, [2017](#)).

Another milestone that has contributed to a well-structured occupational health and safety system in workplaces is the demand for Workplace Reintegration Management (German: Berufliches Eingliederungsmanagement, BEM), which has been legally anchored since 2004. The goal is to restore employees' health and ability to work (see Sec. 167 subsec. 2 German Social Code (SGB IX); German Social Accident Insurance (Deutsche Gesetzliche Unfallversicherung e.V., [2022](#)). In this context, works councils and staff councils regularly negotiate company and service agreements, which not only include measures for Workplace Reintegration Management but often integrate holistic approaches to Corporate Health Management (German: Berufliches Gesundheitsmanagement, BGM).

The demand for (more) paid vacation also originates from trade union advocacy and activities. Only through union pressure was a minimum standard of 24 vacation days established under the Federal Vacation Act (Bundesurlaubsgesetz). Additionally, studies show that works councils actively ensure that employees actually take their vacation entitlement. Lastly, trade unions typically negotiate collective agreements that go far beyond statutory requirements, often securing 30 or more vacation days for employees in a five-day workweek (DGB, [2024b](#)).

From an 80-Hour to a 35-Hour Workweek in 100 Years

Over the past six generations, weekly working hours in Germany have more than halved. The success story of fairer working hours began with industrialization and the pressure exerted by trade unions, which ultimately led to significant improvements. Since 1870, the reduction in working hours in Germany amounts to approximately 60% (Meiners, [2023](#)). In the early nineteenth century, weekly working hours ranged between 70 and 80 h. In September 1866, at the Geneva Congress of the newly founded International Workingmen's Association (IAA), Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels demanded an eight-hour workday. This demand, which only became a reality years later—and initially only for some workers -, has been included in the recommendations of the International Labour Organization (ILO) since 1979, stating that the average weekly working hours should not

exceed 40 h (Meiners, 2023). Through initiatives like the “On Saturdays, Dad is mine” campaign, trade unions successfully limited Saturday work, making it an exception rather than the norm. The fight for the 35-h workweek was ultimately successful, breaking through the 40-h workweek barrier in several sectors (Meiners, 2023).

From Practice for Practice

Heavy industries have long been associated with high health risks—one example is coking plants, where, despite technological advances, working conditions remain hazardous (Marschall, 2023). At temperatures exceeding 900 °C, coke oven gases are produced, which contain carcinogenic substances. These can cause lung and bladder cancer, particularly for workers in areas with the highest exposure.

Due to pressure from works councils and professional associations, these health hazards have been thoroughly investigated. Air measurements confirmed significant pollutant exposure, which was also reflected in biomonitoring results from affected workers. The studies revealed that the exposure was so high that the measured values did not return to a safe level even on the following day.

Since some harmful substances in production processes cannot be completely avoided, preventive measures had to be implemented. As a result, ventilated helmets were introduced, which significantly reduced the inhalation of harmful substances and led to a 40% decrease in pollutant levels in workers’ bodies. Additionally, improved biomonitoring methods now allow for more precise exposure monitoring, further optimizing protective measures (Marschall, 2023). This success demonstrates how trade union advocacy, research, and consistent prevention efforts can lead to major improvements in occupational health and safety, even in high-risk industries.

Another example, outside of the industrial sector, can be found in the care industry. According to the DGB Good Work Index (2024), almost 70% of employees in the care sector are affected by acute staff shortages. This chronic and widespread understaffing results in significant additional workloads for caregivers.

However, after persistent efforts, the responsible trade union successfully negotiated collective agreements that have brought tangible relief to parts of the care sector. These agreements include binding staffing requirements, secure shift planning, workload compensation, and other relief measures (Auffenberg et al., 2022). By improving staffing levels, the individual workload of employees is reduced. If staffing requirements are not met, and employees experience higher physical and psychological strain, they are entitled to regulated workload compensation, such as additional paid days off.

The Development Continues

Since then, works and staff councils have continued to advocate for modern, family-friendly working hours, making use of their hard-won co-determination rights. Through company and service agreements, colleagues negotiate flexible working hours, home office regulations, mobile work, and more. Today, due to changing life patterns, there is an intergenerational debate on new working time models, including the four-day workweek.

Trade unions particularly support those working in industries that require shift work and where work locations cannot be flexibly changed. Additional freedoms must be granted, especially in these areas (Meiners, 2023). At the same time, trade unions ensure that employers do not use the four-day workweek and mobile work as an excuse to increase workloads, for example, by simply redistributing the hours of the fifth workday across the remaining four. Another concern is the debate over whether full wage compensation should not be paid. However, what is overlooked here—despite being otherwise frequently emphasized—is efficiency and productivity, as a four-day workweek could actually make employees more effective (Backmann et al., 2024).

Moreover, some employers attempt to cut costs—especially heating costs in office spaces—by shifting work to home offices. This often leads to a blurring of boundaries between work and private life, and often an extension of working hours rather than a reduction. Here too, it has always been the trade unions, works councils, and staff councils that protect against exploitation and abuse, demand the recording of working hours from the very first minute, and negotiate collective agreements and company agreements to safeguard employees. The distinction between home office and mobile work has also clarified for employers that these are not unregulated areas. Employers remain obligated to provide home and mobile workers with ergonomic work equipment, adequate workplace setups, and essential work materials (Piel, 2020).

In summary, trade unions continue to serve as a central anchor in matters of occupational health and safety. Only through their persistent efforts can an economic system based on profit, productivity, and efficiency also prioritize the needs of employees. From a business perspective, strengthening occupational health prevention is essential to increasing employee productivity and enhancing employer reputation, making it a valuable investment in competitiveness. From a macroeconomic standpoint, workplace health initiatives reduce overall costs and serve as a key strategy to control rising healthcare expenses (Maar & Fricker, 2011). Looking at history, it is evident that trade union achievements have greatly contributed to improving conditions for all workers in Germany and beyond. Their role remains highly significant in society. Challenges give rise to solution-oriented demands, which in turn translate into necessary measures, ultimately leading to laws, company agreements, and collective bargaining agreements. In short, as trade unions, we fight for concrete improvements at various levels for the benefit of workers.

However, success does not just mean defending past achievements—trade unions must also continue to act as a strong voice for employees in both politics and

business. It is the primary mission of the political arm of trade unions to address new challenges facing employees today, whether it be artificial intelligence, digitalization, the emergence of new job profiles and the associated requirements, or many other developments. Expanding co-determination rights, improving trade union access to workplaces, and ensuring strong involvement in legislative processes are all crucial to creating lasting workplace improvements. These measures directly contribute to a healthier and safer working environment. For workers, trade unions are the most powerful tool they have. This was true in the past, and it will remain true in the future.

Reimagining Unions in Organizational Behaviour Research

Kaylee Somerville and Julian Barling

More than 35 years ago, one of us (Barling, 1988) evaluated the state of research and teaching on unions and their effects in organizational psychology courses. Barling highlighted how much the field had overlooked unions' meaningful influence on critical organizational outcomes such as job satisfaction, wages, productivity, and turnover. The commentary urged researchers to broaden their focus, calling for integrating industrial relations (and I/O psychology) and union-related issues into teaching, research, and practice to offer a fuller perspective on organizational behavior. Yet, since that time, the situation has not changed. For example, only 54 papers on union-related topics were published in top organizational behavior journals between 1988 and 2024—an average of 1.5 per year. There is much to gain from bringing unions into our classrooms and research, given their significant role in organizational dynamics and occupational health and safety (Barling et al., 1992; Freeman & Medoff, 1984). Similarly, recent reviews highlight the absence of research addressing implementable practical implications and broader societal challenges—pointing to unions as a medium for change and policymaking (Aguinis et al., 2022; Hughes & Dundon, 2023).

Why Does this Gap Still Exist?

While unions are important and compelling topics of study, at least two challenges may complicate research in this area. First, some of the most interesting questions about union behavior emerge when bargaining breaks down, or strikes begin or end. However, these events are difficult to predict, making it challenging to plan and respond in time to study them effectively. Yet, unexpected and unpredictable events are a crucial component of organizational reality (Morgeson et al., 2015) and unions (e.g., Bluen & Barling, 1988). As Johns (2006) pointed out—“research in organizational behavior is seldom timely enough to capture the impact of such events as the Enron meltdown or the September 11 tragedy” (p. 390). Looking at unions, 2023 was one of the most eventful years for unions in the United States in decades. Strikes and collective action gained significant media attention and public support (Desilver, 2024), which emphasizes the urgency of considering unions now before we lose the opportunity yet again.

Second, there are misconceptions about the alignment of organizational scholars and unions, much of which is ideological and often unconscious (Fullagar, 1984; Rosen & Stagner, 1980). Yet, these misconceptions create a feedback loop where limited research sustains a lack of mutual understanding and interest in unions as key actors in organizational outcomes such as occupational health and safety, and from unions viewing organizational scholars as trustworthy partners.

Organizational Scholars and Unions in the New World of Work

Historically, unions have been enormously successful in both negotiating with employers and forcing governments to protect and improve workplace health and safety. However, significant social events in recent years have changed the meaning and nature of work, the needs of employees and union members, and thus how unions might enhance members' well-being.

First, the rise of unstandardized work—such as gig work through platforms like Uber and Upwork (Wu & Huang, 2024)—may reshape labor relations. This type of work presents numerous challenges to worker well-being (Cropanzano et al., 2023; Wu & Huang, 2024) and may provide different avenues for collective actions, such as voice behavior (Bucher et al., 2023). The gig economy will force organizational and occupational health and safety scholars to add collective actions outside of formal labor unions to our research agenda, such as class exemptions (Hardy & McCrystal, 2022), and how these new forms of collective bargaining impact gig worker well-being. Doing so, however, will complicate the already fraught relationship between unions and organizational scholars.

Second, climate change must be considered, particularly in its impact on work-related injuries. Rising temperatures significantly increase the number of work injuries, contributing to approximately 20,000 cases annually, regardless of whether the job is indoors or outdoors (Park et al., 2021). These authors also emphasized that the severity of heat-related risks can be influenced by firm investments in workplace safety and heat mitigation policies, with government regulations, such as California's 2005 mandatory heat illness prevention standard, playing a significant role in reducing workplace injuries over time. Therefore, more research is needed to explore this issue further to better equip unions in supporting these efforts (Hughes & Dundon, 2023).

Third, “mega-threats” — large-scale, diversity-related incidents that receive significant media attention — have been increasingly recognized for their negative impact on employees (Leigh & Melwani, 2019). Following distinct mega-threats, employees belonging to targeted identity groups experience heightened embodied threats leading to unproductive work behaviors, including withdrawal (Leigh & Melwani, 2022). These diversity-related events present broader well-being challenges, highlighting the need for more research on how unions can support employees by providing resources to cope with such events. Relatedly, unions have historically been part of wide-scale political activism (Ahlquist & Levi, 2013). Much remains unknown about how this type of political activism affects union commitment and satisfaction, both of which influence psychological well-being. While organizational

behavior focuses on organizational ideology and political action (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016), this research still largely neglects labor unions.

Fourth, and finally, the rise of artificial intelligence is now changing the nature of work. Unions have already taken a leadership role on the issues of artificial intelligence in bargaining, specifically in negotiating new contracts in the 2023 Writers Guild of America (WGA) and the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) strikes, which secured new policies around how producers can use artificial intelligence (Scherer, 2023, 2024). Beyond the entertainment industry, a deeper understanding of the impact of artificial intelligence on worker well-being is necessary for shaping future workplace policies. For instance, Tang et al. (2023) found mixed results regarding the well-being effects of interacting with artificial intelligence. Further research could help union members assess how their unions can support them in navigating these changes. Alternatively, the meaning and power of strikes may change as work becomes more automated. Do strikes mean anything in an age where more work is automated and labor cannot be withdrawn, or where union members can electronically cross picket lines?

Next Steps for Organizational Scholars

In this new environment, how can organizational scholars join unions as key advocates for employees' well-being? First, the scope of this challenge becomes apparent from O'Leary and Almond (2009). They showed that the primary "subjects" of organizational behavior research are not dictated by topical relevance but more so, by the ease of access to employees and organizations, for example, through contacts of MBA students (and more recently, we would include platforms such as Prolific). How many of our students could assist us in establishing contacts with unions, given that their exposure to unions has likely been from across the bargaining table? One possibility is a broader methodological approach. Aguinis et al. (2022) suggest greater integration of micro and macro fields and methods to encourage research with wider policy implications, a recommendation that applies equally to labor unions. With more tools available to capture broader issues, such as textual analysis (Kobayashi et al., 2018), researchers have valuable methods at their disposal to enhance the depth and scope of union-related research.

Second, unions have a role to play as they face gig work, climate change, political activism, and artificial intelligence. Labor unions will only regain the prominence they once held when workers view them not just as protecting existing rights and benefits, but as instrumental in creating meaningful change (Kelloway et al., 2008). Successful unions of the future will look toward non-traditional partners, such as organizational scholars, as they look to safeguard workers in an ever-changing landscape.

Third, as organizational scholars, we need to look inward. Our first challenge is recognizing that organizational and occupational health scholars cannot address the issues of labor unions and well-being alone. Answering this challenge is not

something we do *for* unions but something we do *with* unions. Unions need to be equal partners in setting this new research agenda (especially given that most unions do not have the luxury of research departments but do need evidence-informed research agendas), and we need to go from “studying” unions to “helping” unions to “working with” unions. Until we are seen as collaborators rather than adversaries, it is unlikely that we will have any substantial effects on how unions foster employee health and safety. What is called for is a fundamental reimagining by our field of our relationship with unions, and a humbler assessment of what we might accomplish alone.

Looking back, while the 1980’s and early 1990’s were a “golden age” of union research on union commitment, instrumentality, participation, and strike propensity (Barling et al., 1992; Tetrick & Barling, 1995), an immediate question is whether these lessons still apply some four decades later. In a world in which the major challenges facing unions now include climate change, AI, growing inequality, global tariff and trade wars and a politicized and divided union membership, what we now need is a rededication of the same focus to issues that presumably can help unions and their members enjoy greater health and safety, equality and dignity at work—with researchers working alongside union leaders.

Conclusion

To conclude, our hope is that in a lot less than 35 years from now, the relationship between unions, their members, and organizational scholars will be one of mutual understanding, respect, and benefit. By doing so, we can confront the recent seismic shifts in gig work, climate change, political activism, and artificial intelligence. Failure to act now will leave future organizational scholars, 35 years from now, again lamenting the strained relationship between unions and academia and the inability of scholars to help unions meaningfully advance employee well-being.

Authors’ Contribution All authors contributed to the manuscript conception. All authors read and approved of the final manuscript.

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL. The authors declare that no funds, grants, or other support were received during the preparation of this manuscript.

Data Availability NA.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Ethics Approval Since this manuscript did not involve data collection, it was exempt from ethics approval.

Informed Consent Informed consent was not necessary because no data was collected.

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