



Who's to Blame for Union Woes?

by **Michael Barone** ([more by this author](#))

Posted 03/07/2011 ET

The labor union movement is in deep trouble. Only 6 percent of private-sector employees are union members.

Voters are beginning to realize, thanks to governors like [Chris Christie](#) of New Jersey and Scott Walker of Wisconsin, that public-sector unions have negotiated unsustainable levels of pensions and benefits -- and that public-sector unions are a mechanism for involuntary transfers of money from taxpayers to the Democratic Party.

Who's to blame for the unions' plight? I blame Frederick W. Taylor. Most readers will ask, who? And those who know the name might wonder why I pin the blame on someone who died in 1915.

But Taylor, the supposed pioneer of scientific management, was an influential man in his day and long after. He conducted time and motion studies aimed at getting workers to perform most efficiently single tasks on long assembly lines.

Workers, he said, should be regarded as dumb animals, incapable of initiative, inefficient when they are not compelled to perform the same simple task in the same single way over and over.

Taylor, as Robert Kanigel makes clear in his excellent biography, "The One Best Way," was something of a charlatan. He faked a lot of his time and motion studies. Nevertheless, he had huge influence on the managers of assembly-line industries like autos and steel.

Their workforces consisted of off-the-farm and immigrant hordes with little education and often little English. They thought the best way to profits was to use Taylorite methods to squeeze maximum production out of their low-skill workers.

The industrial unions -- the [United Auto Workers](#), United Steelworkers -- that succeeded with government help to organize industries in the 1930s understandably saw their main task as combating Taylorism.

They would prevent management from ordering dreaded speedups, based on Taylorite analysis, by insisting that every change in work rules must be negotiated between shop stewards and foremen.

They would prevent management from rewarding speedy workers by insisting that promotions be based on seniority and preventing any hint of merit pay.

All that made a certain sense -- in the 1930s and in decades afterward, when auto and steel managers, full of contempt for their workers, clung to Taylorism. Unions in turn clung to an adversarial model that assumed that workers' interests were [diametrically opposed](#) to management's.

Today, many liberals look back with nostalgia to the days when a young man fresh from high school and military service could get a unionized job on the assembly line and be guaranteed a lifetime job.

Well, I grew up in Detroit, and I know that these workers hated those jobs. Taylorism, even modified by union representation, was a miserable way to make a living.

That's why the UAW in 1970 got the Big Three automakers to agree to "30 and out" -- retirement after 30 years on the line with a generous pension. And that's why the UAW had to bargain for retiree [medical benefits](#), because workers retiring at 50 were 15 years short of Medicare.

"The Company and the Union," William Serrin's fine book on the 1970 UAW strike, makes interesting reading now. Serrin argues that the UAW should have asked for more, because the companies would never go bankrupt. On that, he was clearly wrong.

But also he wondered why the union and company couldn't work together to make assembly-line work more creative and fulfilling. That struck me as nonsense at the time. But in retrospect, it's what the Japanese and other foreign auto companies were able to do.

In contrast, the UAW stuck to contesting the Taylorism Big Three managers clung to. And the then-new public employee unions -- like the [National Education Association](#), led by Michigan teachers -- took the UAW as their model.

They would never allow management to speed up their work. Promotions and firing would be governed by seniority. They would never, ever allow merit pay.

This adversarial unionism assumed that management would always be Taylorite. But that has been increasingly untrue in the [private sector](#) and was never really true in the public sector.

As a result, non-union private-sector companies have thrived, while unionized companies have gone under. And public-sector unions, with their bought-and-paid-for politicians, have produced public-sector workforces that are unresponsive, unaccountable and impossibly expensive.

Countering Taylorism is an obsolete and unsustainable strategy. Union leaders need to realize that Frederick W. Taylor is dead.

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