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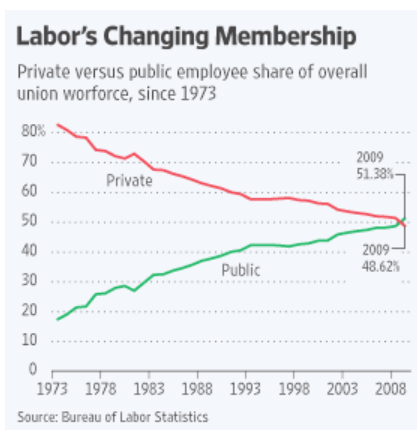
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The Public-Union Ascendancy

Government union members now outnumber private for the first time.

It's now official: In 2009 the number of unionized workers who work for the government surpassed those in the private economy for the first time. This milestone explains a lot about modern American politics, in particular the paradox that union clout with Democrats has increased even as fewer workers belong to unions overall.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported recently that 51.4% of America's 15.4 million union members, or about 7.91 million workers, were employed by the government in 2009. As recently as 1980, there were more than twice as many private as public union members. But private union membership has continued to decline, even as unions have organized more public employees. The nearby chart shows the historical trend.



Overall unionism keeps declining, however, with the loss of 771,000 union jobs amid last year's recession. Only one in eight workers (12.3%) now belongs to a union, with private union employment hitting a record low of 7.2% of all jobs, down from 7.6% in 2008. Only one in 13 U.S. workers in the private economy pays union dues. In government, by contrast, the union employee share rose to 37.4% from 36.8% the year before.

In private industries, union workers are subject to the vagaries of the marketplace and economic growth. Thus in 2009 10.1% of private union jobs were eliminated, which was more than twice the 4.4% rate of overall private job losses. On the other hand, government unions offer what is close to lifetime job security and benefits, subject only to gross dereliction of duty. Once a city or state's workers are organized by a union, the jobs almost never go away.

This means government is the main playing field of modern unionism, which explains why the AFL-CIO and SEIU have become advocates for higher taxes and government expansion in cities, states and Washington. Unions once saw their main task as negotiating a bigger share of an individual firm's profits. Now the movement's main goal is securing a larger

share of the overall private economy's wealth, which means pitting government employees against middle-class taxpayers.

And as union membership has grown in government, so has union clout in pushing politicians (especially but not solely Democrats) for higher wages and benefits. This is why labor chiefs Andy Stern (SEIU) and Rich Trumka (AFL-CIO) could order Democrats to exempt unions from ObamaCare's tax increase on high-cost health insurance plans. To the extent Democrats have become the party of government, they have become ever more beholden to public unions.

The problem for democracy is that this creates a self-reinforcing cycle of higher spending and taxes. The unions help elect politicians, who repay the unions with more pay and benefits and dues-paying members, who in turn help to re-elect those politicians.

The political scientists Fred Siegel and Dan DiSalvo recently wrote in the Weekly Standard about the 2006 example of former New Jersey Governor Jon Corzine shouting to a rally of 10,000 public workers that "We will fight for a fair contract." Mr. Corzine was supposed to be on the other side of the bargaining table representing *taxpayers*, not labor.

From time to time, usually requiring a fiscal crisis, middle-class taxpayers in the private economy will revolt enough to check this vicious political cycle. (See Scott Brown.) But sooner or later, the unions regain their political advantage because taxpayers have other concerns while unions have the most to gain or lose.

This is why most Democrats once opposed public-sector unionism. Such 20th-century liberal heroes as New York Mayor Fiorella LaGuardia and Franklin Roosevelt believed fervently in industrial unions. But they believed public employees had a special social obligation and could too easily exploit their monopoly position. How right they were.

As we can see from the desperate economic and fiscal woes of California, New Jersey, New York and other states with dominant public unions, this has become a major problem for the U.S. economy and small-d democratic governance. It may be the single biggest problem. The agenda for American political reform needs to include the breaking of public unionism's power to capture an ever-larger share of private income.

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