

## Unions Facing Obstacles

**L**ABOR union organizers were riding high in the 1950s when they had more than 30 percent of the nation's work force paying dues. It is now reported that the proportion belonging to unions is less than 20 percent and falling.

Several factors are working against the unions. One is that more women are in the working force, some of whom may not be convinced they want to pay dues to unions as they are now operated.

Another is that numerous businesses have found it pays in the long run to treat employees fairly and pay them well. Where this is happening, employees often decide there is no need for a union. An increasing number of workers do not like having to pay union dues in order to get or hold a job.

Technology is bypassing the picket lines, too. Nowhere is this more evident than in the telephone industry, where service is nearly normal while thousands of strikers are marching. As other industries utilize automation and electronics, lost jobs could offset any gains made by unions through strikes.

Not to be overlooked is the effect of the air traffic controllers strike, where the system maintained safety and restaffed with several thousand fewer workers than before. This month, Continental Airlines warned striking mechanics that they would be permanently replaced if they did not return to their jobs.

Union labor has thrived on the theory that all workers doing

similar jobs should be paid the same, but individuals with superior skills and higher productivity deserve to be paid more. The idea of "merit pay" for better work is spreading.

The union argument that costs of their perpetual demands for higher pay and more benefits can always be added to costs of products and services is fallacious. Thousands of workers have been displaced by this practice, because it made American merchandise more vulnerable to competition from imported products.

It is generally conceded that workers are entitled to a fair share of profits in an industry, although they may not be responsible for any losses incurred. But others have rights as well.

Shareholders who own the businesses are entitled to a fair profit on their investments. Management should have the right to operate efficiently. Consumers have a fair claim to products made in a competitive free market, resulting in reasonable prices.

These groups have sometimes been ignored as Congress enacted laws demanded by union leaders who made liberal campaign contributions and promised to deliver blocs of union labor votes.

But this may change as unions diminish in size and influence. When candidates must look elsewhere for money and votes, more consideration may be given by winners to other interests and rights.