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# In Columbus, Conflicted Emotions on Unions

By [SABRINA TAVERNISE](#)

COLUMBUS, Ohio — When protesters descended this week to oppose a bill that would weaken collective bargaining for public workers, Elaine, a cashier at a Dollar Store in a crazy quilt of strip malls in southern Columbus, had little sympathy.

“Adults acting like children down at the Statehouse,” she said, ringing up a customer’s paper plates.

“The unions are getting a little bit out of control.”

For a city so important in the formation of the modern American labor movement, Columbus, Ohio’s capital, seems remarkably free of affection for unions.

In interviews on Wednesday, some people, like Elaine, a woman in her 50s who did not give her last name because it was against her store’s policy to speak to reporters, were openly against them. But most people had mixed views, expressing sympathy for the deteriorating condition of the middle class, but also frustration that a union member could get a better deal.

So it goes in America’s often conflicted relationship with its working class, a tangled history whose next chapter is unfolding, among other places, here in Columbus, where the forerunner to the modern labor movement, the American Federation of Labor, began in 1886 and the United Mine Workers four years later.

“Labor is part of Ohio’s DNA,” said Harley Shaiken, a social and cultural studies professor at [University of California, Berkeley](#).

But to gain their rights, workers had some of the toughest fights anywhere, said John Russo of Youngstown State University. That opposition to labor, still around today, often came from the more conservative, southwestern parts of the state. Testimony in favor of the bill, he pointed out, came largely from that region.

“Ohio has always been filled with dichotomy when it comes to labor unions,” he said.

Fights with unions are erupting at a time when their public approval ratings are at nearly their lowest in a quarter-century, according to a [Pew Research Center survey](#) of 1,385 adults in early February. That finding was in the air in Hal Kuhn’s tobacco shop on Wednesday. “There’s a lot of complaining,” said Mr. Kuhn, 38, who said he lives paycheck to paycheck managing the shop six days a week. “It’s, ‘Oh, I didn’t get my break, and I didn’t get yesterday off.’ ”

But if the view of unions has deteriorated, support for allowing them to bargain collectively has not. A [USA Today/Gallup poll](#) found that 61 percent of the 1,000 adults they surveyed on Monday opposed laws taking away the bargaining power of public-employee unions. “You should at least get something after giving your whole life to someone,” said Martha Rollins, 53, a retired warehouse worker who was shopping in the Dollar Store.

But Ms. Rollins was in the minority, possibly because her husband, a retired mechanic who worked for the city, benefited from union protection. Ohio has about five million workers, and about half a million are local and state employees.

More typical was Brett Stephens, 23, who had worked in more jobs since he was 15 than Ms. Rollins has in her lifetime. He had jobs at a snack shop, as a lifeguard, at Little Caesars restaurants in South Carolina and Florida, at a Limited clothing store, with a temp agency, and most recently as a cook in a diner.

He did not go to college, he said, because his grandmother, who raised him after his mother died when he was 9, could not afford to send him. Now he scrapes by on \$10 an hour, unable to afford health care for his two children. It is covered by welfare.

“I think they should stop crying,” he said of the protesting union members. Everyone was working hard and tightening their belts, he said, so why should unions be different?

The heart of the problem, said Vaughn Carner, a retired risk management specialist who was drinking coffee in a diner on High Street on Wednesday night, is the rapid change that has left Americans confused, disoriented and struggling to adapt.

In Ohio, economic decline has redrawn the map, devastating towns and cities, and making some places unrecognizable. Mr. Carner, now 70, recalled making a wrong turn at night in Toledo a number of years ago, not realizing where he was because population decline had left entire blocks abandoned and dark.

“We’re just a little bit afraid, like an old man who is trying to make his way, but is lost,” he said. “We used to be the big boys on the block, but the rest of the world is catching up with us in so many ways.”

Richard Freeman, an economist at Harvard, said he saw the hostility toward unions as a sign of decay in society. Some working-class people see so few possibilities for their lives that it is eroding the aspirational nature that has long been typical of Americans.

“It shows a hopelessness,” he said. “It used to be, ‘You have something I don’t have; I’ll go to my employer to get it, too. Now I don’t see any chance of getting it. I don’t want to be the lowest one on the totem pole, so I don’t want you to have it either.’ ”



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