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Article Summary: Historically a smaller percentage of non-agricultural laborers have opted for union membership in Nebraska than in many other states. Factors that have made Nebraska less receptive to the labor union movement include recent settlement, the availability of free or cheap land, the dominance of agriculture, the rural character of the state, and the industrial mix of its economy.

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A Note on Nebraska and Labor Unions

By David G. Wagaman

The purpose of this note is to provide a picture of relative labor union strength in Nebraska and the nation as a whole, and to offer some general thoughts regarding the reasons for the relatively low level of labor union strength in Nebraska.

Historically the percentage of the non-agricultural labor force unionized in Nebraska has been less than that in many other states. Roughly 23-25 percent of the non-agricultural labor force, or 20 percent of the total labor force, is unionized in the United States. This represents approximately 24 million people. The US ranks 17th among developed nations in terms of the percentage of the non-agricultural labor force unionized— behind such nations as Denmark (65 percent), Norway (60 percent), Belgium (48 percent), and Australia (44 percent). Nationwide the percentage of the labor force organized by unions has been declining since 1954, when almost 34 percent of the non-agricultural labor force was unionized.[1]

Geographically, the South has been less unionized than the non-South, with approximately 15 percent of non-agricultural employment unionized as opposed to roughly 30 percent for the non-South.[2] States with the highest degree of unionization are West Virginia, Michigan, and Washington, with about 40 percent of non-agricultural employment unionized. Pennsylvania, New York, Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, Missouri, and Montana range from 32-37 percent. States with the lowest degree of unionization are North and South Carolina with seven percent. South Dakota, Mississippi, Florida, Georgia, North Dakota, Texas, Virginia, and Oklahoma range from 15-20 percent. In Nebraska 15-19 percent[3] of the non-agricultural labor force is unionized. Of approximately 92,000 union members, over 30,000 are in the public sector[4] and over 60,000 are in the private sector.[5]

Why has Nebraska been less receptive to the labor union movement historically, and why has there been relatively little unionization in Nebraska?

First, Nebraska was one of the last states to be settled. To be sure, many people "passed through" Nebraska (as they do today on I-80) via the Platte River valley and other routes to California, Oregon, and Washington, but many areas of the state were not occupied by white settlers until about 100 years ago. Therefore, one factor is the relatively recent settlement of Nebraska and its link with the more industrialized portions of the US. With few exceptions, frontier life must be primarily concerned with survival against natural elements. Survival in an industrialized or "man-made" environment is not the primary problem.

Tied to this factor was the presence of free or cheap land in Nebraska until comparatively recent times. The relative availability of land can act as both a real and a psychological outlet or safety valve. It provides hope of a potential (if not actual) opportunity to escape social or economic problems by becoming one's own boss. It fostered the dream of one man or family on an island, if not insulated from the seemingly unsolvable problems and conflicts of the world, at least far enough removed from smokestacks (and today, center pivots) to be lulled into complacency. This does not promote a primary concern with industial, collective, or man-made problems and their resolution.

Another factor relating to the foregoing is the relative dominance of agriculture in Nebraska. While agriculture does not dominate the state's economy to the degree it did 20-30 years ago, it still pervades social, economic, and political attitudes. The independent farmer, an almost mythical figure, is not too far removed from the frontier. This yeoman farmer, the last representative of what is considered an ideal economic and social unit in our society, operated with little more than his immediate family as a labor force. The concept neither created the necessity for nor promoted a favorable view of unionization.

Another cause is the rural nature of Nebraska—in some cases still bordering on isolation. Any form of collective action such as unionization requires communication. To be sure, technological advances over the last 20-30 years have moderated the effect of long distances between towns, homes, ranches, and people in most of Nebraska. But the difficulty and expense of communication were serious barriers to collec-

tive activity a state which until recently had only two major population centers (both near its eastern border). Hence organizational costs were also prohibitive.

A union movement did begin to develop in Nebraska prior to World War II. During the World War I period (1914-1919), some AFL local unions in meatpacking were formed, primarily in Omaha. During these years too the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), sometimes called the "I Won't Works" or Wobblies, began organizing —primarily among migratory farm workers throughout the West and Midwest, including Nebraska. However, the organizing movement died after 1919 for several reasons, including the IWW's pro-German and anti-war stance, which precipitated US Justice Department raids on its headquarters in the fall of 1917 and subsequent mass jailing of IWW organizers. In addition to its identification with violence, the IWW was hurt by the Palmer raids of 1919. Finally the introduction to agriculture of the gasoline powered tractor during World War I took away from the IWW an organizing base in the grain fields.

Both the negative impression produced by the IWW and the decreased employment in agriculture following World War I tended to promote a negative social and economic view of labor unions and their strength decreased in Nebraska during the 1920s. In addition, the continuing technological change in agriculture, along with an increasing capital to labor ratio, tended to push people off the farm and into industry in Nebraska. Historically immigration tended to provide an unorganized labor force for American industry. To a certain degree so did increasing capital formation in agriculture in Nebraska and the country as a whole.

The industrial mix of the Nebraska economy also tends to de-emphasize labor unionization. In addition to the agricultural base and the predominantly rural nature of Nebraska, which means there are fewer "plant gates" at which to organize, the economy is highly dependent on banking and insurance, health care and health related professions, and the public sector including government and education. To be sure, there has been—and continues to be—more unionization in these industries. Historically, however, there has been relatively little unionization in these sectors of the economy until the last 15-20 years.[6]

While this is a significant factor, a note of caution is in order. A study by Leo Troy[7] concerning union membership in the South concluded that union membership there is only 57 percent of what it would be if each industry were as strongly unionized as it is in the rest of the nation. In other words, industry mix is not the only explanation of differences in the degree of unionization among states. In addition, we have provided no explanation of why certain industries or sectors of the economy have experienced less unionization historically. We will not address this issue here.

Looking at industry mix a little further, however, it can be noted that some other western states have significant mining and lumbering industries. These industries have been heavily unionized for four basic reasons: (1) seasonality of employment; (2) poor and hazardous working conditions; (3) the existence of "plant gates," or at least camps and concentrations of employees who could easily communicate with one another; and (4) the apparent existence of monopoly profits. In addition, many of the firms in these industries were large, had public name recognition, and had, in some cases, been connected with trust or anti-trust movements around 1900 and with war profiteering during World War I. This publicity led to some public sympathy for the labor unions emerging in those industries and helps explain a slightly greater degree of unionization in certain western states.

Other factors to consider in explaining the relative lack of unionization in Nebraska: (1) Nebraska is a "right to work state," which means the union shop is illegal. (2) Until the 1960s, the public sector in Nebraska had no right to organize—generally the Nebraska Legislature and all branches of state and local government were somewhat anti-union. (3) Active employer resistance exists toward unions. Employers want to retain all management prerogatives and resist sharing this authority with labor. However, these deterrents to union activity seem to result from some of the factors explained previously and are not primary in and of themselves.

Two other points should be mentioned. First, the decision as to whether existing labor unions attempt to organize in Nebraska is affected by the relatively sparse population. If you intend to organize an industry or craft, would you begin in a state with a sparse population and only two urban areas ex-

ceeding 100,000 in population? Probably not.

Finally, working conditions—terms and conditions of employment—may be relatively good in Nebraska. Less unionization in the state and less pressure for unionization among employees may be due to a work force that does not feel as exploited or as abused as that in many other states. In a relative sense, Nebraska just might represent "the good life."

NOTES

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1. Neil W. Chamberlain, Donald E. Cullan, and David Lewin, *The Labor Sector* (3rd ed.; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980), pp. 123-125.
2. Lloyd G. Reynolds, *Labor Economics and Labor Relations* (7th ed.; Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1978), pp. 339, 352; (8th ed.; 1982), p. 323.
3. The percentage depends upon whether unaffiliated unions are considered with national unions.
4. This figure includes over 19,000 public school teachers and over 4,000 state employees.
5. Bulletin #2078, *Directory of National Unions and Employee Associations, 1979,* US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, September, 1980; Government Employees Relations Report (GERR) 71:4106, Bureau of National Affairs, released January 1982.
6. It also cannot be overlooked that unionized railroads are a significant factor in the Nebraska economy.
7. Reynolds, *Labor Economics* (7th ed.), p. 352.