Sociologists of labor are fond of extolling the pros and cons of what trade unions do or have done in the past. But the consequences of labor’s near-disappearance are rarely mentioned. This is the main question in Jake Rosenfeld’s eye-opening book, *What Unions No Longer Do*. Rosenfeld assesses the outcomes of an American society in which its workers no longer benefit from high levels of union membership. In so doing, he has told a new story about a central feature of contemporary American life—inequality—and has tied it to what is typically regarded as nothing more than a footnote of U.S. history—the decline of the labor movement. In the United States, union membership declined at the same time that economic inequality increased. What is the connection?

**Labor’s Rise and Fall**

The post-World War II context proved especially fertile for labor organization, and by the mid-1950s, approximately one-third of all non-agricultural workers had a union card in their wallet. During these prosperous—and anomalous—decades after the war, Rosenfeld argues that a “tripartite arrangement” consisting of labor, government, and business, helped keep wages high. Unions acted as “pay-setting institutions.” Moreover, high levels of union membership helped elect political elites who favored, or at least had to deal with, unions and workers, providing the context of broad socio-cultural support for unions. In this context, workers’ institutions were not bit actors, as many historians have argued. Rather, the labor movement grew into “the core equalizing institution” (p. 2) of post-war capitalism, the backbone of a rising multiethnic middle class (emphasis in original).

However, union membership declined precipitously throughout the seventies and eighties. By 2009, union membership in the private sector, where it has historically had the largest impact on workers’ livelihoods, clocked in at 7 percent, the same level as during the first year of the Great Depression.

A few explanations for this trend have risen to prominence in sociological circles. The globalization of industrial production and the rise of an economy dominated by services and information technology have been seen as a context antithetical to unionization, as well as a prime way that the high union densities within basic industries were either eliminated, shipped overseas, or erased by frightened workers voting out the union and settling for lower wage premiums. Rosenfeld deals less with this explanation, however, in favor of two others.

First, many scholars today see unions themselves as their own gravediggers because their highly bureaucratized organizations that solidified after World War II were not equipped to organize new workers. Second, while Rosenfeld allows that declining approval rates for unions are a reality, he insists they be considered in the context of contemporary politics. In other words, behind both of these trends are political changes that favored the growth of viciously anti-union employers and lawmakers who have played a leading role in labor’s fortunes. In making this claim, he adds a political dimension to the crisis of union decline, a central concern for labor sociologists.

Having established a more comprehensive understanding of labor’s fate, Rosenfeld turns to his main act: explaining why it matters so much. Through rigorous statistical analysis and a keen eye for history, Rosenfeld demonstrates that the ramifications of labor’s historic decline are much broader than we previously thought. His work...
suggests that what is of central concern for labor scholars should be on the radar of economic and historical sociologists as well as, in fact, anyone interested in inequality.

Unions and Inequality

Unions are pathways to social equality in a number of ways. First, unions raise the wages of the lowest-paid workers more, relative to better-paid workers in the same workplace, thereby contributing to wage parity. Second, unions often try to bargain for equal pay for those whose skills and experience levels are more or less the same, eliminating racial, gender, age, and other biases in pay and treatment. Third, high union densities structure the economic and cultural climate for all workers, union or not, through a spillover effect. For example, when union levels within a given region or industry are high enough, even nonunion employers tend to increase benefits and wage packages to deincentivize unionization. Finally, unions provide working people with organizational ties to political issues that impact their lives. When unions are strong, they help to elect sympathetic politicians who place constraints on the power of business. Given this, the story of the rise and fall of unionism has much to tell us about our current predicament.

Rosenfeld argues that one traditional union strategem—striking—is rarely done anymore. Large strikes, now nearly eliminated (he says there were almost 500 in the early 1950s, and the count collapsed to five in 2009), are one weapon that unions have given up or traded in. Falling union density rates combined with the hard lessons of the 1980s and 1990s chastened even militant unions into filing grievances instead of taking to the picket lines. However, contrary to some labor scholars who see the resumption of the strike as necessary to rebuild labor’s former glory, Rosenfeld shows that today wage gains have been decoupled from strikes. The numbers are simply too miniscule to make an impact on the economic landscape.

The across-the-board rise in inequality that stems from labor’s decline also hides deeper racial and gender dimensions that Rosenfeld draws out. The disproportionate representation of blacks in the union movement meant that deunionization hit this population especially hard, while also, obviously, increasing racial inequality. By the 1970s black male private sector union membership had hit nearly 40 percent, and black female union rates were double those of white women. Because union workers make more money and enjoy on-the-job protections and benefits packages, these statistics help illustrate how wage gaps between blacks and whites, especially between women, were mitigated during the times of higher union enrollments. Rosenfeld estimates that had unions retained their peak strength, wage differentials between black and white women in the private sector would be 10–30 percent lower.

As wage-setting institutions and political engines for worker empowerment, unions once exerted significant clout in American life. This book’s analysis reveals the collapse of organized labor as a key determinant of our high levels of economic inequality today. However, Rosenfeld’s singular focus on economic inequity unfortunately narrows the broad scope of his title, as unions no longer do many things aside from leveling the wage scale. Workers have always joined unions for reasons other than higher pay—to gain greater control over the labor process, to neutralize a bad boss, and to enjoy greater socio-cultural freedoms, all of which have something to do with social inequality, broadly conceived. Similarly, he makes only one passing reference to the Occupy Wall Street movements, which can be largely credited with raising the issue of inequality in a way that had not happened in decades. The on-the-ground conflicts between labor unions and those movements, the most recent and vocal contemporary proponents of economic redistribution, would have usefully complicated the otherwise simple equation of “more unions, more equality.”

Furthermore, readers with an eye for history may object to his characterization of a “tripartite arrangement,” a labor, business, and government nexus during the midcentury decades. This period is central to his argument because it is the high-water mark of wage compression and equality delivered through substantial union membership and a sympathetic state, and it highlights the
degree to which politics matter for union success. Although this is the common reading, there is significant debate on this issue that goes unassessed in his book. Was there really a tacit agreement that led to better working conditions? Or were unions simply better at fighting? Even during the exceptional post-war decades, Peter Evans (2010) suggests that effective labor organization deserves more credit than a friendly state for labor’s success. C. Wright Mills’ *The New Men of Power* (1948), to take a classic example, highlighted the deep skepticism trade union leaders held for corporate elites. Nelson Lichtenstein’s more recent work forcefully argues against the existence of an alleged labor-management accord (see Lichtenstein 2002).

**Government is not the answer?**

But the most contentious point of Rosenfeld’s book is not his analysis of what is wrong, but rather his critique of the only thing organized labor has going for it today—the public sector. Today over half of all union members are in the public sector, and they maintained their power during the period of private sector union decline. This has understandably given the outside impression of government unions as a protected oasis of middle-class and educated white-collar bureaucrats.

Ultimately, he concludes that “government is not the answer.” The primary basis for his objection is a concern with inequality. Because public sector workers are generally more highly educated, for example, unions become the guarantors of those with a college education, not blue-collar workers, which widens the gap between the advanced degrees and everyone else. Also, because public sector workers outearn their private sector counterparts even without a union, unions lose their historic connection with the least well-off. Finally, the wage premium for joining a union in the public sector is very small, and so labor’s historic mission of raising wages is thereby muted. In other words, he writes, “as unions concentrate in the public sector, their historical role representing those with comparatively low education and income levels is reduced” (p. 66).

Rosenfeld argues that the political impact of organizing within the public sector is limited too, as new public-sector union members only increase their voter turnout rates by very small degrees, compared to private-sector union members, who start from a lower place of political engagement. The value added, in other words, is comparatively low for public-sector workers compared to those at private companies. Moreover, he says, the public-sector workforce has likely reached its capacity, with little room to grow. So while private-sector unions are almost gone, government employee unions have nowhere to go.

But we can employ Rosenfeld’s own counterfactual methodology to see the importance of public-sector unions, especially as they concern the issues that matter most to his analysis. For example, while public-sector unions today may represent women at high rates, blacks, immigrants, and other ethnic minorities are vastly underrepresented, even though black workers are more likely to be employed in public jobs. A decline in public-sector unionism therefore would disproportionately impact black workers, exacerbating wage inequality by race. And though union rates are relatively high for public workers—about one-third of public employees are unionized—there are still great gains to be made there.

The political dimension is even more crucial. Public-sector workers are concentrated in highly contentious industries like healthcare and education. Because they outnumber private-sector workers by about nine to one, it is unsurprising that the last two decades have seen union-busting efforts increasingly pointed toward public employees. Fiscal crises (real, imagined, or manufactured) have provided an excuse for local governments to sell off public infrastructure, cut wages and salaries for workers, decrease police and fire staff, and so on. Public-sector unions are often the first to fight these policies that impact all of society. The most recent attacks began in 2011 when workers, students, and other community members occupied the Wisconsin state capital to protest the shredding of labor rights for government employees. But the antiunion forces outlasted the events in Madison and spurred a broad coalition of conservative forces to introduce similar legislation in other states, with varying degrees of success.
What Unions No Longer Do was published before the most recent and devastating of these political fights was over: the Supreme Court’s ruling in the *Harris vs. Quinn* case, perhaps the most anti-union piece of legislation from the bench in recent history. The specific question was whether or not publicly-funded home healthcare workers, who are covered through union collective bargaining contracts, can be compelled to pay union dues. Samuel Alito’s decision, representing the cabal of conservative justices, declared the creation of a new “partial public employee,” a worker in a state of legal limbo somewhere between the private and public sphere. Though the New York Times declared it a “partial victory” for labor, most people within the movement see it as far more dangerous: by essentially allowing the free-rider problem of right-to-work states to expand into the public sphere, the continued power of public-sector unionism hangs in question. Which brings us back to why public-sector unions are so important, in contrast to Rosenfeld’s claims. The public sector is far from the comfortable, stable, and secure place he seems to suggest, and its unions are more necessary than ever. While public-sector unions are not *the* answer, no other single strategy alone is either.

**Concluding Remarks**

Rosenfeld’s book appears at a time of intense debate about inequality in America, and his original analysis suggests that something important has been left out—workers and their organizations. *What Unions No Longer Do* concludes without a principled call for unions to be more like social movements and without urging the working class toward increased militancy. Rosenfeld knows far too much about the problem for that bit of optimism. In fact, there is little in the book that is prescriptive at all. One thing unions once did that they no longer do, and that goes unmentioned in the book, was to inspire confidence in a grand alternative—to the power of business, to the ubiquity of the market—for a new kind of political regime and a better life. The construction of the economy and political society that Rosenfeld seems to pine for requires this belief. But his book is less concerned with the future. Instead, it offers a powerful counterfactual that should be of general interest in the social sciences and for anyone interested in how American society got where it is today. In that sense, it is at once a work of history, a tale of today, and a story of what might have been.

**References**

