

# Union Decline: A Geography Based Assessment

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*This paper discusses the factors that led to the decline in unionization worldwide, based on a review of literature between the years 1995 and 2013. The paper first traces the factors that led to the decline based on geographies, followed by those that led to the decline of unionization in five countries namely United States of America, Britain, Germany, India and China. These countries have been chosen more as a convenience sampling rather than being representative of any economy or geography. The factors leading to union decline has been categorized into economic factors, socio-political factors, cyclical factors, structural factors and other factors. It needs to be mentioned that there are a lot of idiosyncrasies and there is no "iron law" of trade union decline.*

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## Introduction

Scholars started inquiring into the trend of unionization around the early 1900s. John Commons is considered a pioneer who studied unionization trends around the early 1900s and tried to predict patterns of growth and decline of unionization (Ebbinghaus & Visser, 1999). It was furthered by Ashenfelter, John Pencavel, Bain and Elsheikh mainly in the British and US contexts. These scholars for a long time believed that unionization trends followed the business cycles in an industry. When the industry flourished, there was a growth in the unionization and vice versa. It has been established beyond doubt that globally, unionization has been on the decline. The debate about the exact year of decline continues but there is a broad consensus amongst scholars of industrial relations that unionization has been on the decline since late 80s around the world (Checchi & Visser, 2005; Ebbinghaus & Visser, 1999; Visser, 2003; Western, 1997). Pattern of union growth and decline was predominantly studied on the basis of the effect of cyclical factors like unemployment and inflation on the unionization along with factors like major disturbances or a catastrophe and real wages (Ashenfelter & Pencavel, 1969; Bain &

Elsheikh, 1976). This strand of research on the patterns of growth and decline of unionization has moved since then from UK & US and has been studied in other economies and geographies like Germany, Scandinavian countries and Canada. The scope of the research has expanded to include structural, economic and socio-political factors along with cyclical factors. It is also important to note that the trade unions are actors embedded within the social structure (Polanyi, 1957 for embeddedness). While trade unions perform the important function of representing the workers, the geographical context within which they are located leads to some differences (Herod, 2002; 2003). Hence viewing union decline through the lens of labor geography would nuance our understanding.

The aim of our paper is to present an integrated view of the factors that have led to decline in unionization, established in literature based on geographies. Since there are differences in connotations about unionization and union practices, we first clarify and define the scope of unionization. We present our analysis of the factors that have led to decline in unionization in terms of geographies and specific to some countries namely the USA, Britain, Germany, India, and China. Finally we discuss the implications and future research possibilities.

### **Definition & Scope of Unionization**

Since there are wide differences in the understanding of unions and their activities, which could lead to different connotations of unions and unionizations

in different geographies (Visser, 2006), we present a definition of Union and the scope of the union activities. For the purpose of this paper union has been defined as, “an organization of employees which seeks to represent the job interests of its members to employers and in some circumstances to the state, but which is not dominated by either of them” (Bain & Price, 1980: 2). Unionization can be defined in terms of union membership, union density, union activities and union power. Union membership is simply a dichotomous variable in the form of yes or no. Union Density is the ratio of unionized workforce to the total workforce. Net union density is the ratio of current unionized workers who are working and total workforce while gross union density is the ratio of unionized workers including retired and unemployed individuals who are drawing unemployment benefits and the total workforce. Union density has been used as a proxy for union power in studies (Addison, Bailey, & Siebert, 2003). Union activities include involvement in activities like strike, collective bargaining and worker representation. Studies however use strike action and collective bargaining settlement as a way of operationalizing union activities. For the purpose of our review we have taken unionization as any one or a combination of the above mentioned factors (Kuruvilla, Das, Kwon & Kwon, 2002; Machin, 2000).

### **Africa**

Of all the geographies, Africa has dismal rates of unionization because the continent is plagued by serious problems

that need attention like war, mass exodus, extreme poverty, hunger, AIDS epidemic, religious and divisive forces. Major part of Africa was colonized for the better part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which has impacted unionization. While the struggle for independence did forge a close relationship between the politics and unions, post-independence the conflict for supremacy between unions and political parties has been widely observed.

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Countries like Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda and Zambia have state controlled union federations. Independent unions are outlawed. Cold war also played a part in Angola, Mozambique, Congo and Kenya. There was a constant tussle between the union federations either under the American influence or under the communist influence. (Visser, 2003). Dictatorial powers in Zimbabwe and Malawi also led to low unionization rates (Visser, 2003). Apartheid movement did encourage unionization in South Africa, but decline in the manufacturing and mining sectors coupled with weakening of Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) have contributed to union decline. Due to Apartheid movement in South Africa, union movement received some fillip, however finally there was a decline due to decreased mining and manufacturing activities and the traditional stronghold Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU).

Based on the review, it can be concluded that the level of unionization has been impacted by three major issues namely political situation, large informal sector and priority to serious issues. However three factors contribute to our lack of more knowledge about the African continent. Most of the studies on unionization trends have been carried out in developed economies. The studies on union growth and decline are generally with a lag. Africa, apart from being a third world economy, studies are rare due to the non-availability of reliable data and burgeoning informal sector.

### Asia

Asia is the biggest continent and hence too vast to generalize any trend of union decline however we gain a better perspective by dividing Asia into four groups of countries namely West Asia, New Industrializing countries of East Asia (Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan), the Tigers and South East Asia (Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam) and the large and populous countries of South Asia (China and India) (Visser, 2003).

West Asia consists of Arab countries where immigration is a huge concern. The debate still continues as to the rights of an immigrant with respect to unionization. In Israel, unions were routed with the defeat of the Histadrut (the powerful and the sole union confederation formed in 1920 to take care of the labor welfare) in 1994 and the change in the National Health Insurance Law under which health insurance was made com-

pulsory for every Israeli citizen and all citizens were eligible for a uniform benefits package. The state took over some of the health insurance under its control (Visser, 2003) which weakened the union's influence over workers. Countries like Malaysia, Singapore, and Philippines also face the problem of immigrants and trade unions are grappling with complexities of collectivizing them. Casualization and outsourcing has led to decline of unionization in places like India, Pakistan, China, Philippines. As far as union situation in East and South Asia is concerned, scholars agree that it is a result of the weak industrial relations system, decentralization of collective bargaining, resistance to unions, and encouragement to enterprise unionism leading to decline of unions (Kuruville et al., 2002; Visser, 2003).

Asian system of unionization is relatively decentralized. Unions in Asia have relatively less socio economic influence in the policy level decisions in comparison to their European counterparts. The Asian example offers all possible combinations of factors like globalization, structural change in employment, decreasing share of public employment, increasing mobility of both capital and labor, problem of immigration and in general resistance to unions by employers.

### **Europe**

Europe is a peculiar case particularly after creation of the European Union (Blaschke, 2000). The decline in unionization in Europe can be attributed to the decline of unionization in major member

states like UK, France, Germany and to some extent Italy (Visser, 2003). According to Checchi and Visser (2005) union decline is related to labor market changes mediated by a limited set of labor market institutions like the Ghent system, the employment protection legislations, wage indexations and social security benefits which was also supported by Visser (2002). It was widely speculated that the formation of European Union also contributed to the decline of unions across Europe for which support is ambiguous at best (Blaschke, 2000).

Union activities are like public goods, and are plagued with the problem of free riders. In order to counter this, incentives and plans have been linked to union membership (Checchi & Visser, 2005). And from a utility perspective individuals would avail these union facilities if benefits outweigh the associated costs. For e.g. the rates of unionization are tied to the prevalence of Ghent system of unemployment insurance. And in the Scandinavian countries namely Finland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark where this system is still prevalent, unionization has remained stable. However institutions other than unions have emerged which take care of the unemployment insurance which eroded the Ghent System which has resulted in the decline in unionization in these countries (Blaschke, 2000; Bockerman & Uusitalo, 2006; Ebbinghaus & Visser, 1999; Visser, 2002; 2003).

The public sector and the manufacturing sector have been the strongholds of trade unions. However with structural changes occurring to the employment like

mushrooming of service sector, and the share of public employment coming down, the unions are finding it difficult to establish themselves in such new avenues. Lee (2005) through his study on 16 affluent OECD which included Scandinavian countries, UK, Germany, Italy, France, Austria and Belgium, concluded that international migration played an important role in the decline of unionization. Bockerman and Uusitalo (2006) found that in Finland, the younger employees had lesser propensity to unionize. Other structural changes like increasing number of women in the labor force has also contributed to the decline in unionization. Globalization and liberalization has led to increased capital mobility which has led to decline of unionization.

**International migration played an important role in the decline of unionization.**

Thus it can be concluded that the economic and labor market changes have heavily influenced the decline of trade unions in Europe. Common explanations have been, decreasing share of public employment, work force diversity, shift towards the service sector, increasing mobility of labor, degeneration of sectoral bargaining to unit level or firm level, erosion of Ghent system and change in attitudes towards unions (Visser, 2003; Wallerstein & Western, 2000).

### **Central & Latin America**

The broad trend in decline in unionization can be attributed to the increas-

ing informalization of labor, trade liberalization and end of state patronage of populist models of unionization (Koonings, Kruyt, & Wils, 1995; Visser, 2003). Both unions and organized labor were repeatedly marginalized because of repeated coups and wars in Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, and Argentina (Visser, 2003). However like Africa, Latin American countries also suffer from the problem of lack of availability of reliable data to conclude or analyze any meaningful trends.

### **Australia & New Zealand**

Political climate seems to have contributed to the decline of trade unions in Australia. With the election of conservative government and the pressures of globalization the labor market was deregulated. The 1997 Workplace Relations Act brought by the Conservative government encouraged enterprise level bargaining, and prohibited closed shop union systems and undue advantages given to union members. Compulsory arbitration agreements were extended to entire sectors including the non-union workers. In New Zealand removal of external legitimization of unions proved to be the nemesis of unions (Harbridge & Honeybone, 1996 cited from; Visser, 2003). Other factors which contributed to union decline include the withdrawal of state protection to unions and the collective bargaining.

Table 1 presents a summary of the five factors that have contributed to union decline. These are cyclical factors, economic factors, socio political factors, structural factors and other factors.

Union decline is the aggregate effect of these five factors and the geography. While factors do emerge, a divergence too exists within geographies. For e.g., in Europe reasons for union decline in Britain (rise of non union members, government policies, weakening influence of unions in politics) are different from those of Scandinavian and Nordic countries (erosion of Ghent System). Similarly in Asia the reasons for decline of trade unions are starkly different for the South

Asian countries, new industrializing countries of East Asia and West Asia. Since there are some similarities in terms of the factors and geographic differences, union decline is a case of converging divergences (Katz & Darbishire, 2000; Machin, 2004).

**In Asia the reasons for decline of trade unions are starkly different for the South Asian countries.**

**Table 1 Summary of Factors that Have Led to Decline of Unionization**

Cyclical Factors	Economic Factors	Socio Political Factors	Structural Factors	Others
Unemployment	Globalization (Foreign Direct Investment, Imports, Exports, Trade)	Political patronage	Level of collective bargaining	Cohort effects - younger employees do not want to join
Inflation	Liberalization Capital mobility  Fringe benefits/ changing composition of compensation	Labor laws Political business nexus  Employer resistance to unions	Ghent system Share of employment (public sector, manufacturing, services, casual/informal) Composition of work force (migrants, female participation)	Education level Rise of Never membership

### United States of America

United States of America (USA) has been a pioneer in studies on trends of unionization. Apart from cyclic factors like unemployment and inflation which has received adequate attention (Ashenfelter & Pencavel, 1969; Bain & Elsheikh, 1976), mobility of capital and labor both have played a key role in the decline of unionization in USA (Elliot &

Freeman, 2003). Globalization particularly foreign direct investment and exports added to the competition which in turn led to decline in unionization (Slaughter, 2007). With the decline in manufacturing share of employment (which has been the stronghold of unions) and the increasing share of services in the employment, unionization has declined. Moreover with the rise of privatization the employment share of public sectors which also have

been the strongholds of trade unions, has come down drastically. Other structural changes to the employment like increasing number of women in employment, and increasing level of education have also contributed to the decline of unions (Visser, 2003). Decentralized enterprise level bargaining coupled with free rider problem and absence of systems like Ghent system have contributed to trade union decline (Wallerstein & Western, 2000). Decline of unionization can also be attributed to the reduction in the collective action due to changes in the wage structure of the workers where in the role of pay for performance and fringe benefits have increased tremendously. The workers do not want to risk losing the sizeable chunk of benefits and hence collective action and strike activities have reduced leading to a decline in unionization. The wage gap between union and non-union workers is favorable towards the non-union workers which has again contributed to the decline in unionization (Edwards & Fuess Jr., 2005; Fiorito, 2001).

The rise of new human resources (HR) practices coupled with the stalling tactics adopted by employers has contributed to union decline. The new practices try to nip the formal collectivization in the bud by carrying out commitment initiatives, engagement initiatives, and other such programs (Fiorito, 2001). Another method devised by the employers to stall unions at work place is the development of a parallel industry in the form of consultants and legal experts who exploit the loopholes in the labor laws, and experts at union busting (Kleiner, 2001;

Warner, 2013). One of the examples related to such loopholes is the certification process of unions under the National Labor Regulations Act where in employers use all possible practices to stall the union recognition processes which includes intimidating and victimizing union leaders. Thus the opposition and resistance of employers towards the unions (Kleiner, 2001) coupled with weak enforcement of labor laws has proven to be the nemesis of trade unions in USA (Warner, 2013).

Apart from cyclic factors like unemployment and inflation, the other reasons that have contributed to union decline in USA include, the economic factors like increased mobility of capital, increased foreign direct investment, trade, changes to the composition of wages and increased role of benefits, compositional changes in labor like increased participation of women, changing demographics of the workers, structural factors like declining share of public sector employment, declining manufacturing employment, increasing share of services, and political and policy level factors like the lax implementation of the labor laws, and increased employer resistance to unions by using lawyers, consultants and legal experts (Kleiner, 2001) and other factors like the rise of new human resource management (HRM) practices at workplace.

### **Britain**

The rise of “never membership” is a new trend that has been found by Bryson and Gomez (2005: 67). It was found more among the younger workers, the employ-

ees of private sector, and those who are earning lower wages. Structural changes to employment like the shift from manufacturing to services, the rise of women as a part of workforce, the decline of public sector employment have resulted in the decline of unionization (Machin, 2000). He also found that the unionization also depended on the age of the firm. Older firms were likely to have a significant presence of unions. The level of collective bargaining also has been another contributing factor towards the declining unionization. Sectoral level bargaining being replaced with firm level bargaining agreements has led to extreme decentralization in collective bargaining leading to decline in unionization. Political factors also played important role in the decline of British Trade Unions. Margret Thatcher adopted aggressive policies and diluted the privileges of the union members. Regime change and election of the labor governments was not successful in increasing the influence of the trade unions in Britain (Howell, 2004; Roeche, 2000).

Thus for Britain, the unique phenomenon of rising never membership along with the socio political factor in the form of aggressive anti-union policies adopted by Margret Thatcher, compositional changes in workforce which includes more participation of women in employment and young workers, the structural changes like shifting of employment from manufacturing to services, decreasing share of public sector employment and the erosion of collective bargaining institutions have led to the decline of trade unions (Addison, Bryson, Teixeira, &

Pahnke, 2011; Bryson & Gomez, 2005; Ebbinghaus & Visser, 1999; Machin, 2000; Visser, 2003).

## Germany

**There were no significant differences in the decline patterns of both East Germany and West Germany.**

Post World War II Germany was divided into East and West Germany. East Germany had a predominantly communist outlook while West Germany had a predominantly democratic outlook. Germany was unified in 1990. Schnabel and Wagner (2007) did a comparative study of union decline in West Germany and East Germany and found that there were no significant differences in the decline patterns of both East Germany and West Germany. Unlike the US and Britain, the compositional changes of the workforce did not contribute much to the decline of unionization. Fitzenberger, Kohn, and Wang (2011) found that personal characteristics like age, sex, marital status, full time or part time employment and prior history of unemployment and experience of unions play an important role in tracking the decline of trade unions in East Germany and West Germany

Although collective bargaining at sectoral level has been of great importance in Germany, it began to be diluted with the rise in competition, unemployment, and globalization and under the pressures of unification. As a result the employers moved out of their associations, which led

to reduction of workers covered under sectoral level bargaining. Extremely rigid agreements forced employers to not only quit the employers' associations but also to abolish the agreements. This has contributed to high unemployment levels (Fitzenberger et al., 2011) and also decentralization in collective bargaining (Addison et al., 2011). Unions have consistently failed to negotiate satisfactory agreements with the employers. Hence they have increasingly fallen out of favor with the employees as they have not been able to maintain the structure of the collective bargaining. Higher mobility of capital and labor has also contributed to the decline in unionization. Further it was also found that among the workplace characteristics factors like size of firm, ownership of firm (foreign/domestic), age of establishment, and the region in which it was located played a role in the decline of unionization.

Thus for Germany it can be summarized that the erosion of sectoral level bargaining, the pressures due to unification of Germany due to which jobs had to be moved from East Germany to West Germany, unemployment, globalization, increasing mobility of capital and labor and to some extent compositional changes to workforce have caused the decline in unionization (Addison et al., 2011; Fitzenberger et al., 2011; Schnabel & Wagner, 2007).

### **India**

In India, unlike the West, the share of manufacturing employment has not gone down drastically despite which

unionization has consistently declined. Unions were concentrated in the public sector and enjoyed political patronage which gave them political leverage. Liberalization policies adopted in the 1990s proved to be the Achilles' heel for the unions (Kuruvilla et al., 2002; Visser, 2003). Unions opposed liberalization while the political parties were in favor of liberalization. And the unions lost their political leverage. Unions fell out of favor of the parties while the employers gained favor resulting in an employer-political coalition. Clearly competition has taken precedence over income protection or the industrial peace (Frenkel & Kuruvilla, 2002; Kuruvilla et al., 2002). Due to no clear rule regarding union recognition in India, collective bargaining institutions are relatively weak (Bhattacharjee, 2001). This coupled with the increased informalization and casualization of labor led to drastic decline of unions (Kuruvilla et al., 2002). In addition dilution of labor laws and lax enforcement have resulted in decline of trade unions (Bhattacharjee, 2001; Chakrabarti & Dhar, 2008; Das, 2011).

**Due to no clear rule regarding union recognition in India, collective bargaining institutions are relatively weak.**

Thus as far as India is concerned the decline of unions was primarily because of macroeconomic factors i.e. liberalization policies, socio-political factors like the increased relations between employers and political parties and unions losing out their political leverage together

with weak or non-existent collective bargaining system and dilution of labor laws by individual states to increase the investment activities.

## China

China had a highly protective environment till 1978. After 1978, the Chinese Government started intensive economic reforms. As a part of aggressive economic reforms the state owned enterprises were given autonomy to operate. The government also withdrew the central wage benefits and permitted large scale contracting of work. This led to a boom in the casualization of labor. Pay for performance systems and schemes were encouraged to make the industries competitive. The main union federation which had a monopoly has been diluted and almost crippled. The economic reforms were of such intensity that managerial autonomy grew while the powers of local enterprise unions were consistently diluted.

**The combined effects of weak enforcement of labor laws, aggressive anti union policies, and loss of influence of the central trade union federation have led to decline of unions in China.**

The combined effects of weak enforcement of labor laws, aggressive anti union policies, and loss of influence of the central trade union federation have led to decline of unions in China. Like India, China too has enacted a number of labor friendly legislations which in-

clude health and safety standards, minimum wages, minimum labor standards, laws against discrimination but enforcement has been a problem. The employers aggressively opposed unions in favor of low cost labor intensive factories and lastly the central trade union federation which had been involved actively in organizing the labor has not been effective lately i.e. it has become lax and unable to attract and organize workers, which has led to unions falling out of favor of workers.

Thus the loss of faith of workers on the central trade union federation, the macroeconomic factors like globalization specifically opening of Chinese markets to foreign capital, the structural change in employment i.e. state owned enterprises given autonomy, socio political factors like weak enforcement of legislations and aggressive resistance to unions by employers are the main factors which have led to the decline in unionization in China (Frenkel & Kuruvilla, 2002; Kuruvilla et al., 2002).

## Future Research

The factors that have emerged as reason for decline in unionization can be categorized into the cyclical factors, the economic factors, the socio-political factors, structural factors and other factors. Despite geographic idiosyncrasies factors like globalization, liberalization, capital mobility and increasing casualization of labor point towards common trends across the world which have led to the decline of unionization around the world. Moreover political and economic factors

are pretty dynamic. Most of the studies on decline in unionization have been done using the secondary data sources which takes a lot of time to collect and compile. Considerable time lag has been observed; when the study is conducted and when it gets published. Hence we need to exercise caution while drawing inferences.

**Unionization is affected by three logics namely, the logic of competition, the logic of employee income protection and the logic of industrial peace.**

Unionization is affected by three logics namely, the logic of competition, the logic of employee income protection and the logic of industrial peace (Frenkel & Kuruvilla, 2002). The factors that have led to decline in unionization are a combination of these logics. The logic of competition is related to the increase in globalization and liberalization which leads to competition amongst the firms. The logic of industrial peace is the legislations and systems related to collective bargaining, while the logic of employee income protection is the legislations related to the minimum wages, social benefits, unemployment benefits, wage indexations. For China and India clearly the logic of competition has gained precedence over logic of industrial peace and logic of employee income protection (Frenkel & Kuruvilla, 2002). For USA, Britain and Germany the logic of employee income protection and logic of industrial peace has weakened considerably. Numerous comparative studies indicate idiosyncrasies like government poli-

cies, political environment, structural factors etc. (Checchi & Visser, 2005; Ebbinghaus & Visser, 1999; Lee, 2005; Visser, 2003; Wallerstein & Western, 2000) and that there is no “iron law” (Western, 1997) of trade union decline

For academics and scholars, decline in unionization is still a fertile ground for research. Although the factors that have led to decline in unionization are contingent upon the state of economy, political climate, policies adopted and historical influence, the geographical context within which a union is embedded seems to play an important role. Additional empirical investigation which incorporates geography as a variable along with the structural, cyclical, socio political and the economic factors can nuance our understanding of patterns of convergence and divergence in union decline. Research also needs to focus on developing economies like India and China to improve our understanding of the unionization. It would also be interesting to investigate the coping mechanism that unions adopt to combat the decline in unionization.

### **Conclusion**

We have presented a geography based assessment of union decline in this paper. We found evidence of five main factors namely the cyclical factors, the economic factors, the socio-political factors, structural factors and other factors to be affecting union decline in various proportions. It can also be inferred that trade union decline is a case of converging divergence. While there is some amount of convergence in terms of the

factors affecting decline, the geographical context within which a union is embedded seems to affect the unionization praxis. Evidence of geographic idiosyncrasies can be found which point to a need for further exploration of the link of geography and trade union decline

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