

When quill met parchment one fateful day in 1787 and the framework of the American government was drafted, the founding fathers provided protections against two different kinds of tyranny: monarchy and mobocracy. The first of these is rule by the few, the privileged, those who happened to step into power regardless of the public's opinion of them, while the latter is rule by all, in which, as James Madison stated, the government becomes a "mere instrument of [the] majority." Either extreme is equally harmful – while monarchy on its own gives citizens a limited voice, mobocracy leads only to chaos and disarray. And so the democratic republic was created, intricately designed to keep total control from both small minorities and the large majority, in which power ultimately rests in the hands of all citizens who, through various linkage institutions, elect representatives to conduct that power. Organized labor unions are just one of these vessels through which the American public has its voice heard.

When unions first appeared during the industrial revolution, they were highly controversial. Their principles were rooted in those of the American revolution; ideals like social equality, fair labor and autonomous citizenship were at the forefront of their philosophy. These unions arose from the necessity for improved work conditions and, though they faced numerous conflicts, largely succeeded in their endeavors. While modern day work conditions are hardly comparable to those of the industrial revolution, unions still play a vital role in contemporary politics.

The very basis of an operative, if not healthy, republican democracy, is the active participation of its citizens. As Henry David Thoreau stated, every man must "make known what kind of government would command his respect." In order for America to have a thriving democracy, linkage institutions – which act as the connection between social America and political America – like unions, must be dynamic, constantly growing and changing with society.

---

Constitutionally granted rights like assembly, speech and petition are not always protected in the workplace, but when a unified, progressive union lobbies at the highest level of government, they counteract and balance the lobbying of corporate giants and protect these rights for workers. If the workplace is to be a direct reflection of the democracy that we reside in, and unions are the vessel through which workers' rights are secured, then unions are not only beneficial but necessary for the working populace of a democratic society.

While unions operate on a large-scale level in the national government, their local impact cannot be overlooked. The legislation that unions promote is centered around the individual – about protecting each worker so that they may reach their full potential. In professions like the fire service, union protections reduce the high risks that accompany the job. Only because the workers in these high-risk jobs are safeguarded can they, in turn, protect and serve the public. This social focus, through which an individual can promote positive change in communities, combats the defeatist attitude that all too often surrounds modern-day politics. This is the role of unions: lobbying and striving for integrity in national government, while also securing and advocating with commitment to individual lives.

Unions epitomize the American ideals that this country was founded on and continues to strive towards. Through unions, workers gain louder political voices, allowing them influence in politics. Union lobbying promotes more equalized representation of the American population, and union-bolstered legislation benefits both the individual and the society at large. And lastly, if we are truly a government, as Abraham Lincoln said, “of the people, for the people, by the people” then, in Samuel Gompers words, unions that are “of the working people, for the working people, by the working people” belong in a prominent role in American politics.

---