

## Regional

# Local sociologist studies unions and feminism

Although labor unions have declined in power over the past decades, they remain an important factor in understanding how society works.

"Union membership has been declining for many, many years," said Linda Markowitz, a professor in the department of sociology and criminal justice at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. "When I started on this topic 20 years ago there was a sense of doom among unions. Unions have tried to move into the service industry, and recently we have seen service industry workers, like those at McDonalds and other service industry workers in New York, going on strike."

A native of Dallas, Texas, Markowitz obtained her bachelor's degree in sociology from the University of Texas at Austin, and her master's and doctoral degrees, also in sociology, at the University of Arizona. From her time as a graduate student, Markowitz has been interested in the topic of union organizing. But what does she think about the decline of union influence? For her, that does not mean that unions are no longer relevant.

"I do think that even though unions can be very problematic, they are incredibly necessary," she said. "We wouldn't have the kind of wages we have now if unions didn't exist presently in some organizations." In order for some organizations to avoid unions, Markowitz explained, they make wages comparable to shops that have unions.

"So even though the membership in terms of private industry is fairly low, maybe 9 percent, the reality is that that 9 percent is maintaining the current conditions we have set for all workers. Not only the wages but also the benefits you receive. I think unions are trying to maintain their survival, but I think if they do keep decreasing in numbers it's going to be problematic for all workers," she said.

Markowitz has become interested in studying worker activism, whether as part of a union or not.

"I was comparing two different organizations, one in which organizing strategies really taught unions how to be active, and one that was completely top-down," she said.



Dr. Linda Markowitz in her office.

Courtesy of Dr. Linda Markowitz

"Most organizing strategies tend to be top-down. When they go in, it is mainly the organizers doing most of the work, getting the cards signed and trying to mobilize workers. And when that type of organizing strategy exists, you tend to see workers who are not very active in the union.

"The workers tend to feel like, 'I'm paying you dues, what are you doing for me?' I think because most organizing strategies tend to be top-down that that is people's experience when they get into unions. Unions tend to be bureaucratic and it makes it difficult to be active. Also, sometimes workers are afraid to be active because they are afraid of retribution from the employer," she said.

One interesting fact about the history of the labor unions in that Labor Day, which everywhere else in the world is celebrated on May 1, is on the first Monday in September in the United States.

"The Haymarket riot happened in the 1860s, and this was a time in U.S. history in which industrialism was really new, so capitalism was a new thing," Markowitz explained. "So there is a lot of controversy over people leaving their farms and sort of being forced into these factories where they had less power and less control. So in the city of Chicago, on May 1, there was a place called the hay market and a bomb went off and some people were killed and they pinned it on some anarchists who were actually hanged. And that is sort of what sparked the Labor Day movement all over the world except for here."

Another topic that she has studied is ecotourism, a very active industry in developing countries. But the people with the knowledge of the local natural resources are usually the poor local inhabitants. So, who really benefits from that particular industry?

"I think that is going to depend on who is controlling that industry," said Markowitz. "If the people in that community are controlling it, they do tend to benefit. But if it's outsiders coming in, people from western countries, we don't see that trickledown effect to

## Aldemaro Romero Jr. College Talk

the people in those countries. Instead we see a cooptation of the land and a cooptation of the knowledge, so it really depends on who is controlling that industry."

Another topic that she has studied is feminism and why that movement isn't as strong as it once was, particularly given today's societal inequalities.

"I think the third wave of feminism tends to be organized around identity politics," she said. "When that happens people become more individual in the identities which they adopt. So you might say, 'I'm a white middle-class woman, and I have interests that are separate from these other groups.'"

During the first wave of feminism, which was the suffrage and temperance movement, there was a unifying cause that mobilized everybody and most everybody could agree upon. In the second wave, getting rid of unequal wages and laws that made it illegal for women to get certain jobs were also ideas very much shared by lots of different groups.

"Now I think the issues are much more splintered," she said. "For example, women of color might feel they want the right to be able to raise their kids in safe environments with educational systems that provide them resources to allow their children to have economic mobility, where white middle class women might want to ensure that the glass ceiling is broken. You have these different groups with different issues, and you don't have a unifying thing that keeps people together."

*Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at [College\\_Arts\\_Sciences@siue.edu](mailto:College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu).*