National discussion of labor-law reform is dominated by the wrong people—business lobbyists, media elites, politicians trying to score points. Those who are most affected by the issue—workers themselves—aren't even in the conversation. People may talk about what they think workers want and try to justify policy on that basis. But they seldom shut up and listen to the workers themselves.

If they ever dared to, however, they'd find that what workers want is about 180 degrees opposite the current direction of public policy.

Consider—as Congress talks about obliterating Section 8(h)2 of federal labor law, which bars employer-controlled workplace organizations, and the media tell us workers think unions are obsolete—the recent findings of the Worker Representation and Participation Survey (WRPS). This year-long survey of private-sector worker attitudes toward workplace representation and participation was directed by Richard Freeman and myself.

We talked to workers from around the country—in focus groups and through a massive (2,400 respondents) half-hour national telephone survey. What came through loud and clear is strong worker desire for more say at the workplace, frustration with management opposition to letting them have it, and demand for independent forms of worker representation way above current organization levels. "I want a union but they won't let me have one," is one way of summarizing these findings, which certainly doesn't suggest a popular base for weakening the national labor laws.

Our survey found a massive "representation/participation gap" in America's workplace—a shortfall between the influence workers have in decision-making and the influence they want. This finding held across all workplace decisions—from training and technology to health and safety and wages and benefits—and all kinds of employees. And it was robust even for those operating under the most advanced forms of non-union human resource policies. By better than 80 percent, for example, even non-union participants in advanced employee involvement (ED) programs want more influence "as a group" in how those programs are run.

Why do workers want more influence? For all the obvious reasons, and then some. Because they think it would increase their own job satisfaction, better working conditions and benefits, and improve the handling of individual and group grievances and concerns. And because they think that it will help company performance—in decision-making, product quality, service, and more—and overall economic health.

But employees don't think management is prepared to give them the power they want. A majority of those wanting more influence believe they cannot get it on their own, "even if [they] tried," given "the way things are set up now" in their companies. And super-majorities believe that attempts to form unions will be resisted by management, often by illegal means.

What if management resistance weren't a barrier? Given the chance, 40 percent of employees would join unions tomorrow—about three times the actual level of private-sector unionization.

This includes the 90 percent of current union members who, in a new election, would vote to keep their union—certainly a higher approval rating for that institution than the Congress that's about to attack it. And even those not wanting unions generally favor independent—not company-dominated—forms of workplace representation. While they favor joint worker-management committees, for example, they don't want management selecting their representatives or having the final say in resolving conflicts within.

Does this sound like most American workers want to weaken federal labor laws? Not to me. But, hey, who's listening?

Joel Rogers is professor of law, political science, and sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and active with the New Party, a pro-labor grassroots political party active in 10 states.

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**WHAT WORKERS WANT**

From the Worker Representation and Participation Survey, 1994

| Workers | Plan on staying at their current job or company | Want more say in workplace decision | Believe they can't get desired say "the way things are set up now" | Think more power in decisions would make firm more competitive | Think more power would increase their own job satisfaction | Nonunion who think increased power would improve EI programs | Want to join unions | Think a majority of their colleagues do too | Union members who'd vote to keep their union | Nonunion who think management would oppose union drive at their company | Want to choose their own representatives | Want conflicts resolved by outside arbitrator, not management |
|---------|-----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|----------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------|
|         |                                               |                                 | 60%                                           | 63%                                           | 56%                                           | 76%                                           | 87%                        | 82%                                               | 40%                            | 40%                             | 84%                       | 59%                                     |
POINT OF VIEW

SHUT UP AND LISTEN

JOEL ROGERS

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Workers

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Want more say in workplace decision ................................................................. 63%
Believe they can’t get desired say “the way things are set up now” ......................... 57%
Think more power in decisions would make firm more competitive ................. 76%
Think more power would increase their own job satisfaction .......................... 87%
Nonunion who think increased power would improve EI programs ................ 82%
Want to join unions ......................................................................................... 40%
Think a majority of their colleagues do too ..................................................... 40%
Union members who’d vote to keep their union ........................................... 90%
Nonunion who think management would oppose union drive at their company 66%
Want to choose their own representatives ....................................................... 84%
Want conflicts resolved by outside arbitrator, not management .................. 59%