**Labor Union Members Do Not Always Vote as Unions Want**

American politicians have long appealed to organized labor for support during election campaigns.

The politicians know that thousands of labor union members generally vote for the candidates supported by their union leaders.

Most of the leaders support the Democratic Party and its candidates. And once in elected office, many Democrats support organized labor.

But as the number of unions and membership has fallen over the past half century, so has the loyalty of union members to the Democratic Party.

VOA reporter Carolyn Presutti traveled to the state of Ohio to find out which side is winning the union votes there.

Johnny Nickum is 33 years old. He likes working with wood, and hopes to become acarpenter.

Nickum once worked in the hospitality industry. Many Americans work at restaurants, hotels or other hospitality businesses. Yet he found little growth in that field. So he changed careers, moving to manual labor.

His union supports former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton for president. But in a few weeks, on Election Day, Nickum will vote for her opponent, businessman Donald Trump.

“I’d probably vote Trump right now.”

Labor unions were once a powerful voice in American politics. Some unions still are.

But in recent years, many businesses have closed or moved overseas. Millions of factory jobs that were once performed by union members no longer exist. Union membership has sharply declined.

In the late 1960s, when Clinton and Trump were in college, one in four American workers belonged to a union. That number has dropped to one in 10 now. Union membership was highest in 1979, when there were 21 million. There are now 15 million union members nationwide.

Unions represent about 670,000 workers in Ohio.

Don Vargo worked 52 years in the state’s steel mills and mines. Vargo says he is not sure whom he will support on election-day.

“One day I’m going to vote for Trump; next day I’m going to vote for Hillary. Next day, I ain’t going vote for any of them, you know what I mean?”

Leaders of his union, the United Mine Workers of America, have yet to express support for a presidential candidate. Cecil Roberts is the head of the union.

“This election’s tough for us at the very top because our people are so upset about losing their jobs over the course of the last few years. And we don’t have a recession in Appalachia -- we have a straight up depression.”

Johnny Nickum understands that labor unions have lost members and power. But he will not use his vote to try to help his union. He says he will make his own choice.

“You don’t have to be a follower all the time. That’s the best part of democracy is being able to choose and think for yourself.”

I’m Marsha James.

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**Words in This Story**

**carpenter** – n. a person whose job is to make or fix wooden objects or wooden parts of buildings

**hospitality** – n. the activity of providing food, drinks, etc. for people who are the guests or customers of an organization — often used before another noun

**manual labor** – n. physical work

**mill** – n. a building in which a particular product is made

**straight up** – expression used for emphasis