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# The Role of Modern-Day Labor Unions: Perceptions of U.S. Airline Employees

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**Abstract:** U.S. labor unions began as organizations that were formed to ensure fair wages, better benefits, and improved working conditions for workers. Today, the U.S. airline industry is a heavily unionized environment with many unions representing the different airline employee groups. The purpose of this study was to solicit U.S. airline employees' perceptions regarding the role and responsibilities of modern-day labor unions. The researchers collected 306 completed surveys from participating U.S. airline employees, representing airline pilots, flight attendants, aircraft mechanics, ground operations, and other airline employee group(s). Four significant findings emerged from the research study: (1) over 85% of the participating unionized U.S. airline employees approved of the labor unions that are representing them in the workplace, (2) approximately 75% of airline employees agreed their unions are beneficial to them in the workplace and their representation has improved employees' wages, working conditions, and overall quality of life, (3) about 60% of the airline employees agreed that unions hold too much power and influence, and (4) almost 90% of employees agreed labor union endorsements and union money regarding political policies are wrong. The results and recommendations will be shared with labor union leaders, decision makers in the US airline industry, and aviation academicians, in anticipation these findings will determine if labor unions are perceived by the participating airline employees as no longer a necessity, but more of a mandated choice in the U.S. airline industry.

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## **Background of Study**

Airline labor unions can be defined as a group of workers who collectively pool their resources to affect positive changes in their work environment by collectively bargaining (negotiating) with their employer (i.e., airline management). Airline unions support their membership by representing their skill, trade, or profession to the broader aviation industry as well as to lawmakers and industry regulators who can structure rules and regulations that may positively or negatively impact on members' careers and livelihoods (Union Plus, 2024a). Overall, the ideology is that union members can have more influence and achieve better quality of work life, as well as personal life, if the union and the airline employee act together.

The United States (U.S.) airline industry is a heavily unionized environment, with many labor unions representing different groups of airline employees including pilots, flight attendants, mechanics, ground personnel, customer service agents, and dispatchers (Communication Workers of America, 2013). At three of the four largest airlines – American Airlines, Southwest Airlines, and United Airlines - between 80% and 85% of employees are unionized. This compares to a rate of 11% in the rest of the U.S. (Reed, 2025). So, understanding how and who represents an airline employee's collective professional interests to management, legislators, and the broader aviation industry, and how it impacts his/her career is an important aspect of being an airline employee.

Since the 1930s, U.S. labor unions representing airline employees have gone through a radical transformation, evolving from the refusal to allow its members to work in substandard and unsafe conditions into self-serving social, economic, and political forces that many Americans, including union members, perceive as having overstepped its bounds, as well as having outstayed its welcome (Reed, 2025).

## **Statement of the Problem**

Historically, U.S. labor unions were formed to ensure fair wages, benefits and better working conditions for their members. They negotiate with businesses and governments on behalf of employees who either work in a particular type of job or in a particular industry (Gedye et al., 2021). Public opinion of labor unions has always shifted with U.S. economic fortunes. Overwhelmed from the 2007-09 Great Recession, public trust of corporate America, government and labor unions took a plunge. In 2012, union approval dropped below 50% for the first time since the 1940s (Brenan, 2020). However, by 2019, Americans' 64% approval of labor unions was the highest it had been in 50 years (Levine & Ros, 2019).

Despite record contract negotiations in 2023 between airline employee groups and airline management, the tension between unions and airline management still exists, which comes at the expense of both employees and passengers, begging the question of whether airline unions are in fact serving the best interests of the employees they are elected to represent (Grantham-Phillips, 2023). Also, attitudes towards unionization have become increasingly partisan, and divided geographically. Politically, airline unions have evolved into top financial contributors in state and federal political elections (Associated Press, 2023).

The researchers' intent of this study was to solicit airline employees' professional lived experiences to identify the perceptions of organized labor unions within the U.S. airline industry. Moreover, the intent of this study was to neither support nor oppose labor unions, but to present the findings to determine if labor unions have evolved from their original purpose, historically, into powerful and political organizations, and determine the primary roles of unions in a 21<sup>st</sup> century economy.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to solicit U.S. airline employees' perceptions regarding the role and responsibilities of modern-day labor unions. In addition, the researchers investigated the culture of today's labor unions regarding their employee membership, elected leadership, and corporate counterparts. Today, it appears the only time most Americans hear about union activity is when union members are (1) organizing membership drives, (2) engaging in labor contract fights with management, or (3) participating in a labor strike and picketing at airports (Buer, 2023). Regardless of exposure, though, unions work feverishly behind the scenes everyday with elected management teams to negotiate their employee members' causes and/or demands. Therefore, the researchers examined if membership demands – which seem to cause a repetitive cycle of unions demanding better benefits, concession by management, furloughs, renegotiating existing labor contracts, threat of bankruptcy, hiring additional employees, higher productivity and profits, and finally circling back to a union demanding better benefits – affect the overall perception of the modern-day labor union.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were addressed by surveying U.S. airline employees' perceptions regarding the role of modern-day labor unions:

- RQ1: What is the role of the modern-day labor union representing U.S. airline employees?
- RQ2: How beneficial are labor unions to U.S. airline employees?
- RQ3: How significant is the impact of labor unions on the strategic choices and political landscape of the U.S. airline industry?

### **Significance of Study**

The significance of this study is to investigate the modern-day role of labor unions, specifically unions representing U.S. airline employees. Once the collected data has been analyzed and the findings have been completed, the study will be shared with labor union leaders, decision makers in the U.S. airline industry, and aviation academicians, in anticipation that the results of the study will determine if labor unions are perceived by the participating airline employees as no longer a necessity, but more of a mandated choice in the U.S. airline industry.

## **Assumptions and Limitations**

For this study, the following assumptions were made by the researchers (1) insight gained from the experiences shared by the participating airline employees is representative of what other members of the population that are employed by the U.S. airline industry experience, and (2) the participants answered all survey questions honestly to the best of their knowledge. In addition, general limitations affecting this study were noted as those resulting from the sample size selected for the survey, the relevancy of participant experience with the subject matter, and varying personal and professional background of each participant. And the interpretation of the findings by both the researchers and readers of the report may be influenced by prior knowledge and past experiences, that may place limitations on the acceptance and application of the research findings.

## **Literature Review**

The existing body of literature reviewed by the researchers included, but not limited to, the history of the U.S. airline industry, the Railway Labor Act, the need for airline negotiations, characteristics of airline labor unions, right-to-work laws, and COVID-19 mandates.

### **History of the U.S. Airline Industry**

The U.S. airline industry began to develop after the Air Mail Act of 1925 allowed the U.S. Postmaster General to contract with private airlines. Shortly after the Air Mail Act went into effect, the Air Commerce Act of 1926 was signed by President Calvin Coolidge after aviation industry leaders urged for federal regulation to help the airplane reach its full commercial potential (AvStop, n.d.). The 1926 Act gave the Secretary of Commerce the authority to create air routes, certify aircraft and pilots, and enforce air traffic regulations (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1932). By 1930, 34 airmail routes would be established throughout the U.S. The Civil Aeronautics Act of 1938 brought organized regulation of the domestic civil aviation industry and presaged the development of the Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB) in 1940 (Wallin, 2023). Although the CAB took on many responsibilities, the two primary responsibilities were determining airlines' routes and passenger fares (Wong, 2022). For the next four decades, the federal government regulated the growth of the commercial airline industry, adding more and more air routes; resulting in the increased numbers and types of aircraft seen in the sky. Forty years later, the Airline Deregulation Act (ADA) of 1978 removed federal control and regulation over airfares, routes and other commercial aspects of the U.S. airline industry. Many new start-up airlines were established following deregulation, and airlines were able to fly around the country or even internationally (Wong, 2022). Moreover, airline fares became much cheaper as they were dictated by the demand and supply of the economy and not by the federal government.

### **The Railway Labor Act**

The Railway Labor Act (RLA) of 1926 is a federal labor law that governs labor relations in the U.S. railroad industry. The goals of the RLA are to (1) avoid interruptions to interstate commerce by resolving disputes between carriers and their employees, (2) protect employees' rights to organize and bargain collectively, and (3) require carriers and employees to make

efforts to create and maintain collective bargaining agreements (National Mediation Board, n.d.). The U.S. airline industry was not subject to labor legislation until 1936 when a pilots' union petitioned Congress for labor protection (Reinert, 2001). At the time of its adoption to the RLA, the fledgling U.S. commercial airline industry was not significant enough to greatly impact interstate commerce and, therefore, preserving labor-management relations and providing ongoing industry stability were not pressing concerns. But despite the airline industry's small size relative to the railroad industry, its commonalities with other U.S. transportation industries covered by the RLA warranted application of the RLA to airline employer-labor relations (Tulk, 2004). Therefore, in 1936, the RLA was amended to add the U.S. airline industry to the jurisdiction of the statute. The RLA provides mandatory dispute resolution procedures for the U.S. airline industry. These procedures for resolving bargaining disputes are designed to facilitate negotiations, to narrow disputes, and to pressure labor and management to voluntarily reach an agreement (Transport Workers Union, 2018).

## **The Need for Airline Negotiations**

As the U.S. airline industry was continuing to expand throughout the mid and late twentieth century, the pilots employed by these airline companies were paid little and pushed hard by airline management to fly – regardless of fatigue, weather conditions, or mechanical issues. Realizing they needed a way to collectively speak to airline management and federal legislators about safety concerns and low compensation, pilots turned to unionization to properly addressed their issues (Swindell, 2023). Unionized airline employees have significant reasons for renegotiating labor contracts every few years. The airline business is a dynamic, ever-changing industry that occasionally drives changes to employees' collective bargaining agreements (labor contracts). Additionally, there are certain variables that can have a huge impact on the airline industry, e.g., changes in the economy, new laws and regulations, new competition, etc. Airline management will always try to shed responsibility for providing quality health insurance, good pension coverage, reasonable work hours and job safety protections. Additionally, to lower costs and maximize profits, airline management attempts to make employees' jobs and incomes less secure through consolidation, part-timing, contracting out and sending maintenance jobs offshore (Union Plus, 2024b.). Therefore, all these things need to be thoughtfully considered and discussed during contract negotiations.

## **Characteristics of Airline Labor Unions**

There is no single labor union that represents the entire U.S. airline industry. There are many different labor unions that represent airline employees, including unions that represent pilots, flight attendants, aircraft mechanics, baggage handlers, and other employees. As an example, six different unions represent Southwest Airlines' twelve employee groups (Ewing, 2024). Airline employees, usually from the same craft or class (pilots, flight attendants, mechanics) will negotiate collectively with airline management to affect the desired changes to their collective bargaining agreements (CBA). Union members also elect employee representatives to present the members' skills, trades, and ideas to lawmakers and other policy makers who create the rules that will either positively, or negatively, impact union members' jobs and lives (AFL-CIO, n.d.). All unionized U.S. airline employees are governed under the Railway Labor Act (RLA). A CBA covered under the RLA does not expire; instead, it becomes

amendable. Once a CBA becomes amendable, management and employees come together to jointly work through any changes, additions, etc. that might be desired or needed (Southwest Airlines, 2024). This is a complex and involved process, made more so by the nature of the U.S. airline industry.

## **Right-to-Work Laws**

The popularity of U.S. labor unions has wavered over the past 60 years. With this change has come what is known as right-to-work (RTW) laws. Right-to-work laws are state laws that allow employees to work for a company without joining a labor union or paying union dues. Since November 7, 1944, when Arkansas and Florida had respective RTW legislation signed into law, a total of 26 U.S. states have passed similar legislation (Ballotpedia, 2024). The question surrounding RTW is why RTW is viewed as being necessary. Without exhaustive investigation, one might assume that RTW's popularity is due to suspicion and contempt of unions, as evidenced by actions such as The Boeing Company's decision to build aircraft manufacturing facilities in RTW states. In statements from Boeing executives around the same time, union employee strikes were mentioned several times. In a 2014 Gallup poll, 82% of Americans agreed that no American should be required to join any private organization, like a labor union, against his will (Jones, 2014). This is not to say that those agreeing with RTW opportunities are against unions, but they believe that no person should be denied employment based on their own personal support of labor unions.

## **COVID-19 Mandates**

By early 2020, the entirety of the planet's populations was engulfed within the COVID-19 pandemic. As the pandemic affected all aspects of life, the U.S. airline industry was not immune to its effects. Employees at every level had to deal with the consequences. Once the vaccines were available, employers, employees, and labor unions had a new challenge to contend with: vaccine mandates. While trying to best navigate unfamiliar territory, several airlines, including American Airlines, Alaska Airlines, JetBlue Airways, and United Airlines published vaccine mandates and deadlines (Koenig, 2021). In addition, many of the labor unions representing airline employees - the Allied Pilots Association, the Association of Flight Attendants, and the Teamsters – publicly stated they supported vaccine mandates. However, the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA), the largest pilots' labor union articulated apprehension that all employees must receive a COVID-19 vaccine, as well as the threat of termination for non-compliance. ALPA's statement said, "Employer-mandated vaccinations are an issue that must be bargained" (Thomaselli, 2021). In addition to ALPA's representation, the Southwest Airlines Pilots Association (SWAPA), stated that although the union supported the vaccine mandate put forth by Southwest Airlines management, it would take legal action on behalf of its members because, like ALPA's argument, the airline made the decision without first negotiating with the union (McCarthy, 2021).

## **Methodology**

The purpose of this mixed methodology study was to solicit U.S. airline employees' perceptions regarding the role and responsibilities of modern-day labor unions.

## **Selection of the Research Population**

U.S. airline employees represented by a labor union were the research population for this study. The target population for this study was 200-250 airline employees, including pilots, flight attendants, maintenance technicians, ground operations, and customer service personnel, offering enough diversity in demographics to gain content comparison between the relationship and patterns in variations of the analyzed data.

The research population was determined by convenience and snowball sampling. Convenience sampling is a non-probability sampling technique where data is collected from an accessible and available group of people (Simkus, 2023). The primary objective of convenience sampling is to collect data from participants who are easily accessible to the researcher (Cleave, 2023). Convenience sampling was used for the participants who responded to the survey via social media posts and email responses. Snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling technique in which a researcher begins with a small population and through the course of data collection, the population expands as those initial participants recruit others to participate in the study (Frost, 2024). Snowball sampling is a suitable method when a researcher has a difficult time finding participants' contact information themselves, but population members are likely to know others and share the researcher's information (Kuhn, 2020).

## **Description of the Research Instrument**

Guided by a descriptive research design, this study used a survey authored by the researchers. Descriptive research methods can include surveys, and the data collected by the researcher can be qualitative or quantitative (Surveyplanet, 2022). The primary goal of descriptive research is to provide a comprehensive and accurate depiction of the population being studied and to describe patterns, trends, and relationships that exist within the collected data (Sirisilla, 2023). The survey was created to investigate the perceptions of U.S. airline employees, as well as obtain demographic data and personal comments from each participant related to their professional experiences regarding their representation by a labor union. The research survey consisted of three sections: (1) demographic information, (2) Likert scale statements, and (3) personal comments. The first section of the survey acquired demographic information characterizing each U.S. airline employee participating in the study. The second section of the survey consisted of 18 Likert statements developed to determine the participants' perceptions on modern-day labor unions and the role they play in the U.S. airline industry. The last section contained a text box providing participants with an opportunity to comment on their own personal opinions and professional experiences regarding the labor union that represents them in the airline industry.

## **Data Collection**

The survey created for this study was distributed using Qualtrics, a web-based survey platform that allows for online distribution of the survey to the participants. The survey was distributed electronically via email and social media posts using a secure password-protected web link from Qualtrics. Prior to accessing and completing the survey, all participants were required to read a consent form. After the survey link was initially sent to participants,

approximately two weeks later the researcher sent reminder emails and social media posts encouraging potential participants to complete the survey. After 30 days, the researchers analyzed the data from the completed surveys.

The participants in this study remained anonymous as a result of the researchers using the following methods: (1) the research survey did not ask for the participants' name or any identifiable contact information, (2) the data provided by the participants could not be referenced to an identifiable email or social media account, and (3) the data submitted by each participant was anonymously coded and analyzed using the online survey platform, Qualtrics. Furthermore, all participating airline employees were notified in the consent form that the information they provided would be kept confidential and would be anonymously coded for statistical analysis.

### **Validity and Reliability of the Survey**

Research surveys are used to gather data on a variety of topics, including demographics, opinions, and preferences. Therefore, it is priority for the researcher to validate the survey questions before beginning the data collection process. According to Sevec (2024), validating a survey refers to the process of assessing the survey questions for their dependability. The survey was validated through a construct validation process that involved modeling the survey after several other surveys that had been used in similar aviation-related studies. In addition, the final draft of the survey was forwarded to U.S. airline employees representing the pilot, flight attendant, and maintenance technician employee groups. These six airline professionals chosen by the researchers were asked to examine the survey and confirm its focus on the related research topic and verify its clarity in wording and instruction.

The researchers used Cronbach's alpha coefficient to assess the reliability or internal consistency of the Likert statements in the survey. Cronbach's alpha test is applied when researchers have multiple Likert statements that form a scale and wish to determine if the scale is reliable (Laerd Statistics, 2024). Cronbach's alpha is a coefficient that ranges from 0 to 1, where higher values indicate a greater internal consistency of the variables in the scale (Howard, 2024). According to DeVellis (2003), Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.70 to 0.95 are acceptable values of alpha. The 18 Likert statements were analyzed for reliability using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) yielding a high alpha ( $\alpha = .878$ ) demonstrating that the Likert statements were acceptable and reliable.

### **Data Analysis**

The demographic data and the perceptions of the airline employees from the Likert statements were examined and analyzed through descriptive statistics. Descriptive statistics were used to present quantitative data concisely and meaningfully, as well as for understanding the characteristics of the population sample, and interpreting the findings of the study (SCISPACE, 2024). According to Laerd Statistics (2018), descriptive statistics allows the researcher to effectively describe and communicate patterns that might emerge from the collected data. All participant data collected from the completed surveys were analyzed by the researchers using data analysis tools within Qualtrics, ensuring the validity and accuracy of the results to appropriately support the study's research questions. The qualitative data provided by the

participants in the comments section allowed the researchers to better understand the Likert scale responses provided by the participating airline employees.

## **Ethical Assurances**

Human subjects were an integral part of this study; therefore, this research study was conducted in accordance with Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements established by the Oklahoma State University (OSU) Office of University Research Compliance (URC). The researchers obtained IRB approval (Application Number: IRB-24-357, August 14, 2024) from the URC before conducting any research and collecting data from the participating airline employees.

## **Findings**

### **Participant Response Rate**

U.S. airline employees represented by labor unions were the research population for this study. The researchers collected 306 completed surveys from the participating U.S. airline employees, representing airline pilots, flight attendants, aircraft mechanics, ground operations, and other airline employee groups.

### ***Demographics: U.S. airline employees***

Question 1 of the survey asked the participants to identify their employee group within the airline industry. As shown in Table 1, 59% of the participants are airline pilots, 20% are aircraft mechanics, and 17% are flight attendants. The remaining 4% are employed in either ground operations or other employee groups.

**Table 1**

#### *Participants' Employee Group*

<b>Employee Group</b>	<b>Responses (N=306)</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Airline Pilot	181	59%
Flight Attendant	52	17%
Aircraft Mechanic	61	20%
Ground Operations	3	1%
Other	9	3%

The second demographic question asked the participants how many years they have been a unionized aviation employee. Over half of the participants (60%) have been union employees for 20 or more years. Approximately one-third of the participants have been union members for five to 19 years (Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Years as a Unionized Airline Employee*

Years	Responses (N=306)	Percentage
0-4	18	6%
5-9	52	17%
10-14	31	10%
15-19	21	7%
20-24	46	15%
25 or more	138	45%

Regarding the third question, 72% of the participants stated their place of employment (duty station) was in a Right-to-Work (RTW) state. And 28% of participants indicated their duty station was not in an RTW state (Table 3).

**Table 3**

*Right-to-Work State*

RTW State	Responses (N=306)	Percentage
Yes	220	72%
No	86	28%

The fourth question asked participants if union membership was a requirement for employment at their respective airlines. In Table 4, 70% of participants responded that union membership is required, whereas 30% indicated that union membership was not a requirement for employment.

**Table 4**

*Union Membership as a Requirement for Employment*

Choices	Responses (N=306)	Percentage
Yes	214	70%
No	92	30%

The last demographic question asked if the participants are required to pay monthly or annual dues to their labor union. According to the data in Table 5, 95% of participants are required to pay dues, while the remaining 5% are not required to pay union dues.

**Table 5***Employees' Requirement to Pay Union Dues*

Choices	Responses (N=306)	Percentage
Yes	291	95%
No	15	5%

*Perceptions and realities: U.S. airline employees*

The second section of the survey consisted of 18 Likert scale statements. All participating airline employees were asked to indicate their own personal and professional perceptions regarding the role of the modern-day labor union. Each statement had four options for the participants to identify their perceptions, including strongly agree (SA), agree (A), disagree (D), or strongly disagree (SD). Table 6 contains the summary of the data from the Likert statements.

The researchers decided on a four-point Likert scale to force the participants to form an agree or disagree opinion regarding U.S. labor unions. A four-point Likert scale helps avoid neutral responses, forcing participants to choose between agreement and disagreement. This clarity improves the reliability of data by capturing more definitive opinions and simplifying the analysis of trends (ChartExpo, 2024).

The majority of the participating airline employees (86%) approve of labor unions. Furthermore, 77% of employees agreed labor unions are beneficial by improving wages, working conditions, and overall quality of life. One of the employees commented, "Labor unions were born out of a need for a safety culture within the workplace." However, only a small majority (67%) agreed their labor union provided a collective voice within the workplace, and only 62% of airline employees agreed their labor union has improved communication and negotiations between the employees and airline management with one employee stating, "Collective bargaining by my labor group has led to some of the strongest protections for airline employees."

Regarding morality and ethicality, 87% of employees agreed their labor union has failed in their ethical obligation to protect them and their jobs. One of the participating employees commented, "Our union offered no legal advice during COVID." And another employee stated, "At no point in time did our union or any other US carriers represent us fairly as a union in advising against taking this experimental COVID vaccine that has injured many pilots." In addition, 82% of employees agreed that moral corruption prevails among labor unions to a degree unmatched in any other private U.S. organization. And considering the level of union representation and involvement, only 25% of airline employees agreed the large compensation packages (wages and benefits) paid to union leaders are justifiable.

A large majority of the participants (82%) agreed it should be a personal choice and not a requirement for airline employees to become a member of a labor union, and 73% of employees agreed that compulsory membership in labor unions can lead to dictatorial control of airline employees in the workplace. One employee commented, "Union membership and dues should be optional, to force unions to actually fight for improvement." And 78% of employees agreed the

labor union dues they are forced to pay each month are too expensive as expressed by one employee, “Labor unions exist to get fat from membership dues and are extremely wasteful. They are in bed with management but play the game to justify their existence.”

**Table 6**

Likert Scale Statements (N=306)	SA	A	D	SD
Majorities of US airline employees <i>approve</i> of labor unions.	20% (60)	66% (201)	10% (31)	5% (14)
Labor unions are <i>beneficial</i> for US airline employees. They improve wages, working conditions, and overall quality of life.	25% (76)	52% (158)	18% (55)	6% (17)
Labor unions provide a <i>collective voice</i> , a mechanism for US airline employees to voice their views as to what should happen in the workplace and how they should be treated by airline management.	21% (63)	46% (140)	26% (80)	8% (23)
Labor unions <i>improve</i> communication and negotiations between US airline employees and airline management.	17% (53)	45% (137)	27% (84)	10% (32)
At times, labor unions <i>fail</i> in their ethical obligation to protect US airline employees and their jobs (i.e. protection of unvaccinated employees during the COVID pandemic).	66% (203)	21% (65)	7% (20)	6% (18)
Considering the level of union representation and involvement, the large compensation packages (wages and benefits) paid to union leaders are <i>justifiable</i> .	5% (14)	20% (60)	40% (121)	36% (111)
It should be a <i>personal choice</i> and not a requirement for US airline employees to become a member of a labor union.	47% (145)	35% (107)	12% (38)	5% (16)
<i>Compulsory</i> (required) membership in labor unions leads to dictatorial control of US airline employees in the workplace.	41% (125)	32% (98)	21% (63)	7% (20)
Labor union dues are too <i>expensive</i> .	43% (131)	33% (101)	18% (55)	6% (19)
Labor unions prefer to extend contract negotiations (between US airline employees and management) for several years for <i>self-preservation</i> purposes.	39% (118)	28% (87)	23% (70)	10% (31)
Regardless of blame, US airline employees should not have to endure <i>several years of negotiations</i> to ratify a new collective bargaining agreement.	79% (241)	20% (62)	0% (1)	1% (2)
Labor unions hold too much <i>power</i> and <i>influence</i> .	31% (94)	27% (82)	34% (104)	8% (36)
It is biased for labor unions to amplify and advance <i>specific political causes</i> that are only beneficial to unions.	58% (177)	25% (75)	11% (33)	7% (21)
Labor unions have become <i>counterproductive political instruments</i> who have outlived their value and usefulness for the US airline employee.	27% (83)	28% (87)	33% (100)	12% (36)
Union endorsements and union money, both of which go overwhelmingly to only <i>one political party</i> , are morally wrong.	69% (212)	18% (56)	8% (23)	5% (15)
US airline employees would prefer to be <i>non-union</i> ; however, labor unions are necessary for contract negotiations and overall protection from airline management.	25% (76)	46% (141)	20% (61)	9% (28)
Labor unions are monopoly institutions that raise wages through collective bargaining, not <i>productivity improvements</i> .	27% (83)	42% (129)	24% (74)	7% (20)
Labor unions continue to play a vital role in employee-management relations and <i>positively impact</i> the US airline industry.	15% (47)	46% (141)	32% (97)	7% (21)

*Note: the percentages may add up to 100% (+/- 1%) because of rounding.*

Regarding collective bargaining negotiations between employees and management, 67% of employees agreed that their labor union prefers to extend contract negotiations for several years for self-preservation purposes. One of the airline employees noted, “Unions lack transparency, accountability, will immediately sacrifice one of its own for the perpetuation of the union's overarching goals of survival.” Regardless of blame, almost all (99%) of the participating employees overwhelmingly agreed that US airline employees should not have to endure several years of negotiations with airline management to ratify a new collective bargaining agreement.

When asked if labor unions have become counterproductive political instruments who have outlived their value and usefulness for the US airline employee, only about one-half (55%) of the employees agreed with the statement. However, 83% of employees agreed it is biased for labor unions to amplify and advance specific political causes that are only beneficial to the union organization and not the employees. In addition, 87% of employees agreed that union endorsements and union money, both of which go overwhelmingly to only one political party, is immoral. One participant summed it as, “Too much corruption and too much influence on politics.” With an additional comment, an employee added, “Labor unions are as corrupt as the politicians they are financially supporting in the next election.”

Even though there has been an increase in federal legislation that holds airline management more accountable for working conditions, only 27% of employees agreed that union representation is no longer needed. And although 71% of airline employees would prefer to be a non-unionized employee, they agreed labor unions are necessary for contract negotiations and overall protection from airline management. With one employee offering the comment, “If airline management was trustworthy and fair then labor unions would have no reason to exist; however, as a result, airline employees are stuck with this necessary evil.” Lastly, slightly more than one-half (61%) of employees agreed labor unions continue to play a vital role in employee-management relations and positively impact the US airline industry. As noted by an employee, “Unfortunately, labor unions are a necessary evil for airline employees because airline management is simply looking out for the shareholders' best interests - not the employees.”

## **Conclusions**

### **Summary of RQ1 - What is the role of the modern-day labor union representing US airline employees?**

The role of the modern-day labor union as it relates to the U.S. airline industry continues to be discussed and debated in research and in the workplace. As demonstrated in the findings, 86% of the participating airline employees approved of labor unions. However, several participants provided in their comments that the modern-day labor union has become a necessary evil to hold airline management accountable to its employees and the collective bargaining process. One of the participants stated:

Unfortunately, unions are needed in a major corporate airline. Management is constantly trying to skirt the bargaining agreement toward their needs and if we did not have a union fighting for us, we would be in a world of hurt. Unions are mostly viewed as a necessary evil in our industry.

And even though it is not a large percentage, many of the employees (61%) agreed that labor unions continue to play a vital role in employee-management relations and positively impact the US airline industry. And while 71% agreed they would prefer to be non-union; these employees understand that labor unions are necessary for contract negotiations and overall protection from airline management. However, one of the employees did comment, “If labor unions operated just for the benefit and betterment of their own employees, they would be much more effective - but most airline labor unions today are very active in political endeavors that have nothing to do with the employees.” Even though only 55% of employees agreed that labor unions have outlived their value and usefulness for the US airline employees, 25% of employees agree with the statement that considering the level of union representation and involvement, the large compensation packages paid to union leaders are justifiable.

### **Summary of RQ2 - How beneficial are labor unions to US airline employees?**

Approximately three out of four of airline employees (77%) agreed that unions are beneficial to US airline employees and improve wages, working conditions, and overall quality of life. One of the employees who agreed that unions are beneficial stated, “While there are pluses and minuses to unions, management overreach and overreaction towards employees necessitates union representation.” However, another employee added, “Labor union corruption negates any beneficial action the union can possibly provide to airline employees!” But in contrast, an employee commented, “Labor unions would not be necessary if U.S. airline management did the right thing by way of their employee groups,” suggesting that it is the management side of the airline company that is more to blame than the representing unions.

Furthermore, 67% of employees agreed that unions provide a collective voice, allowing employees to voice their views as to what should happen in the workplace and how they should be treated by airline management. And 62% agreed that unions improve the communication process between airline employees and management during collective bargaining negotiations. One of the participating employees commented, “Dissatisfaction with pay and benefits, job security, and working conditions has led most airline employees to decide the best way to get what they want is through collective bargaining.” Sixty-one percent of participating employees agreed their unions play a vital role in employee-management relations and have a positive impact on the U.S. airline industry. Yet, an employee commented, “Most labor contract improvements within the airline industry are strictly market driven. Unions love to take credit for wins, however very little is gained outside of what the market is willing to accept.”

Expanding on the issue of ethical obligation, 87% of airline employees agreed that at times, their unions have failed in their ethical obligation to protect U.S. airline employees and their jobs (i.e. protection of unvaccinated employees during the COVID pandemic). One employee stated ALPA’s “gross negligence during the COVID pandemic response, including the unethical and totalitarian nature in which they sided with the airlines, was a disgrace.” And a second employee shared the comment, “During COVID my union basically told me they would not help me during a COVID-19 vaccination campaign that led to the termination of many unionized airline employees.” The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted and exacerbated airline worker struggles. Many airline employees were forced to choose between keeping their families safe and earning a paycheck in unhealthy working conditions. All airline employee groups

became essential during the pandemic, and as a result many may have suffered under unsafe and unfair working conditions.

### **Summary of RQ3 - How significant is the impact of labor unions on the strategic choices and political landscape of the U.S. airline industry?**

According to the participating airline employees, over one-half (58%) agreed that labor unions hold too much power and influence. And a larger percentage (73%) of employees agreed compulsory membership in unions leads to dictatorial control of U.S. airline employees in the workplace. Which is perhaps the primary reason that 82% of employees agreed it should be a personal choice and not a requirement for U.S. airline employees to become a member of a union. Furthermore, almost every (99%) employee agreed they should not have to endure several years of negotiations to ratify a new collective bargaining agreement. Perhaps, this is why 67% of employees agreed labor unions prefer to extend contract negotiations between employees and management for several years for self-preservation purposes. And almost the same percentage of employees (69%) agreed that labor unions are monopolistic institutions, which at times raise wages through collective bargaining and not through productivity improvements.

Regarding the political policies of U.S. labor unions, a surmounting 83% of airline employees agreed it is biased and unethical for labor unions to amplify and advance specific political causes that are only beneficial to themselves. A comment provided by an employee stated, “Unions need to stay out of the political bias game. My dues go towards political candidates for office I do not personally endorse.” One reason union membership rates have been falling for decades is because of growing political partisanship. Employee attitudes towards unionization have become increasingly partisan, too, and divided geographically. Politically, blue states tend to have higher unionization rates than red states (Grantham-Philips, 2023). As a result, a higher percentage of employees (87%) agreed union endorsements and union money, both of which have historically gone to only one political party, are morally wrong. Typically, unions inform their members of the benefits of democratic participation, disclose which elected officials have provided the most support for the current labor movement, and encourage their unionized employees to vote for pro-worker politicians.

U.S. labor unions have long aligned themselves with the Democratic Party because democrats have historically been more sympathetic towards, and supportive of the interests of unions and their members (LaJeunesse & Tutella, 2024). Therefore, it is not surprising that 75% of democrats have a positive view of U.S. labor unions and only 35% of republicans have a positive view of unions (Pew Research Center, 2024). One of the participants commented, “The political funding and collaboration with big labor that often conflicts with values of its members [and] is a fatal flaw and ultimately betrays many of the union membership.”

### **Conclusion of the Study**

After the researchers analyzed the data collected from the U.S. airline employees, three significant findings emerged from the research study: (1) most (86%) of the participating unionized U.S. airline employees approved of the labor unions that are representing them in the workplace, (2) approximately three out of four (77%) airline employees agreed their unions are

beneficial to them in the workplace and their representation has improved employees' wages, working conditions, and overall quality of life, and (3) only about one-half (58%) of participants agreed that unions hold too much power and influence; however, an overwhelming 87% of employees agreed labor union endorsements and union money regarding political policies are wrong.

The needs of American workers continue to evolve; therefore, U.S. labor unions must change as well (Singletary, 2024). Just as the future of work is uncertain, so is the future of trade unions. Demographic, environmental and technological changes will continue to affect the modern-day labor markets and will determine those of tomorrow. In addition, the COVID-19 crisis exposed and aggravated existing challenges. Working through the COVID pandemic has been a transformative experience for U.S. airline employees, who earned public support as essential workers. At the same time, many of these employees believed the airline they worked for did not do what was necessary to keep them safe or reward their sacrifices. Some of the comments provided by the participants emphasized that fact that airline employees grew tired of being thanked one day and then treated as expendable the next day (vaccine mandates). Above all, the pandemic made a lot of these employees rethink their values and priorities, which will be brought to the attention of airline management during the next rounds of collective bargaining negotiations.

Additional challenges the labor movement in the U.S. is experiencing includes a decrease in union membership, company migration, and employers' effort on maintaining nonunion status (Fischer, 2010). As mentioned, the U.S. has seen a steady decline of union membership. In the 1950s, 36% of all workers were unionized, as opposed to just over 11% today. This decrease in union membership can be attributed to companies migrating to right-to-work states to initiate a union-free work environment. Since the pandemic in 2020, right-to-work state jobs have increased by a total of 1.3 million. Meanwhile, forced-unionist states have suffered a loss of 1.1 million jobs (National Right to Work Committee, n.d.). And it is all because companies are choosing to move to right-to-work states. Another reasoning point to management and that its unwillingness to work with unions regarding collective bargaining has caused the decline in membership.

Labor unions have always played a difficult role in the U.S. While some view them as key to protecting employees from employer abuse, others view them as unnecessary overreaches in the workplace. While labor unions are a necessity of our present industrialized economy, they are nevertheless, both in spirit and in many of their methods, a necessary evil, as stated by some of the participants. Unions are too often established and maintained on the theory or conviction that the competition between employer (airline management) and employee (airline employee groups) is absolute warfare, in which each side is at liberty to strive for all that they can possibly secure, and in which the victory is always awarded to the strongest competitor. So, regardless of whether the taking of exorbitant profits and/or the reduction of wages below the level of reasonable living were somehow not impossible, union representation would still be desired by employees.

The face of the new modern-day labor movement may be different, but the heart is the same. All workers, regardless of industry or role, want to be treated equally, fairly, and with

dignity and respect for the job. Whether U.S. labor unions are effective will always be subject to debate. Proponents maintain that unions result in better wages, benefits, and working conditions for the employees they represent in the workplace. Critics argue, among other things, that unions are antagonistic towards employers and that union contracts make it more difficult for companies to fire unproductive employees. Labor unions have had a long history in the U.S., and while membership has been on the decline in recent decades, U.S. labor unions will continue to play a major role in advocating for workers' rights, including airline employees.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings from this study and the conclusions drawn from the airline employees' personal and professional comments, the researchers offer the following recommendations.

### ***Recommendation 1***

Several airline employees commented that the Railway Labor Act (RLA), enacted in 1926, is out-dated and should be revised or possibly repealed because it hinders modern-day collective bargaining negotiations. One employee stated, "The RLA needs to be re-evaluated for airline specificity," which reflects the opinion that today's U.S. airline industry has evolved beyond the RLA's original scope. Another employee added, "Because of the restrictions placed on airline pilots through the RLA, almost no force can be brought to bear on airline management to ensure timely or beneficial negotiations." These two employee statements, along with several others, and given the fact the RLA was written and enacted almost 100 years ago, the researchers recommend that Congress and other policymakers should consider a noteworthy revision of the RLA, as well as any other federal labor law that specifically addresses the characteristics of the U.S. airline industry, airline employee groups, and labor organizations elected to represent the employees. Arguments for revising the RLA often center on its perceived inability to resolve modern-day industry disputes efficiently and its unique restrictions on the right to strike. The mandatory mediation process can last for years, which critics argue strips workers of leverage and allow corporate interests to benefit from the status quo. It took nearly seven years for Southwest Airlines and Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association (AMFA) to agree on a tentative bargaining agreement that employees could vote on (AMFA National, 2019). Granted, this would be a massive bipartisan undertaking by Congress, but the U.S. airline industry and its employee groups have significantly changed over the past 100 years.

### ***Recommendation 2***

The U.S. does not have a national RTW law, but a 1947 federal Act does allow each state to enact their own RTW laws. Currently, 26 states have passed RTW laws, which means in the 24 non-right-to-work states, labor unions can take monetary dues directly out of workers' paychecks, even if the workers do not want, and never asked for union representation (Maria, 2025). Ongoing debates continue over the National Right to Work Act after it was reintroduced in Congress in 2025 (ABC, 2025). The Act would extend RTW protections to workers in all 50 states, including airline employees who are currently exempt from state-level RTW protections. Therefore, the researchers recommend that national RTW legislation should be passed by

Congress to ensure that all American workers can choose to refrain from joining or paying dues to a union as a condition for employment. Over the past decades, national laws have been passed that give U.S. workers the protected privilege to unionize; therefore, a national equivalent should be available to workers who want to work but not join a union. This proposed national RTW law would have the ability to repeal existing statutory provisions that allow private-sector workers (airline employees) to be fired if they do not forfeit part of their monthly paycheck to a labor union. According to a 2023 press release, 80% of U.S. workers support putting an end to compulsory union dues as a condition of employment. A national RTW law would prohibit forced union dues and ensure that union membership and mandatory dues become a voluntary choice.

### ***Recommendations for Further Research***

The U.S. aviation industry has become much more adept at resisting unionization in ways that no set of federal labor laws can capture. The concentration of aviation facilities in states like Alabama, North Carolina, and South Carolina is driven by a combination of RTW laws, lower operational costs, and aggressive state-funded incentives (Prah, 2014). In 2024, U.S. states that protect collective bargaining saw an increase of 10,000 union members, compared with the loss of 200,000 union members in RTW states (Sainato, 2025). Further research studies are necessary to determine the overall effects that RTW legislation has had on the labor movement associated with the U.S. aviation industry since the passage of the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act that allowed RTW states to provide workers the freedom to choose whether or not to join a union, or to pay for union dues or other membership fees required for union representation.

As previously stated, several of the participating airline employees commented that the RLA is outdated. These comments state that the RLA is no longer effective, specifically regarding RTW law. As currently written, the RLA prevents state RTW laws from applying to airline employees because the RLA is a federal law that governs the airline industry, so it takes precedence over state RTW laws. The RLA does not require airline employees to be union members or pay union fees unless a collective bargaining agreement between the employer and union representation are declared otherwise. For example, Southwest Airline flight attendants are represented by the Transport Workers Union (TWU) and their collective bargaining agreement (labor contract) specifies that all flight attendants must join the TWU and pay union dues regardless of if they live and work in a RTW state. The researchers would recommend additional studies involving airline employees who are not able to take advantage of state RTW laws because of federal preemption.

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