

Why do labor unions support or oppose trade agreements? How do governments mobilize domestic support for free trade? During the 2025-26 academic year, I worked with Dr. Boram Lee to understand the conditions under which US labor unions support or oppose free trade agreements. Traditionally, organized labor has been theorized as acting based on rational economic interests, supporting agreements that enhance labor wages and opposing those that threaten its member's livelihood. However, trade unions have also expressed concern for non-economic issues, such as environmental, labor, and social protection. The outcome of this research is a chapter of Dr. Lee's book project.

Research and Methods

My work examined a set of 22 of the largest US unions and their response to 12 US free trade negotiations, from 2000-2023. Using news archives, I tracked these unions' response to various developments in the negotiation process, determining whether, how, and why their positions towards each deal changed. This process involved combing through thousands of news articles and comprised the bulk of the research. The data collected was then used to build a database of union positions, quantitatively coded based on the degree of union support or opposition.

To supplement this data, I also built a data set of changes in union history and International Labor Organization (ILO) engagement. The landscape of US organized labor has seen significant change. For example, in 2005, many US labor unions split with the AFL-CIO to form a new 'super-union'. New unions were formed and unions merged and fractured, generating new, conflicting voices in trade debates. To track these changes, I developed a database for each union which coded significant changes to their alignment with larger unions and composition, consulting a range of secondary sources. Similarly, many unions are more internationally engaged than others. The ILO provides an opportunity for labor unions to lodge complaints against governments to remediate alleged labor rights violations. These complaints can take up union legal resources which can disincentivize some unions from filing complaints, instead relying on larger-aligned unions. To understand whether a union's international engagement affects a union's position towards trade deals, proxied as engagement with the ILO, I built a database which tracks each union's support or filing of ILO complaints. This database was developed by examining news archives.

The purpose of these databases is to track key variables which could determine a union's position towards trade deals. This work will then be combined with existing datasets which track a trade deal's issue linkages, or the inclusion of non-trade issues.

Findings

Trade unions face complex incentives in determining whether to support trade agreements. Some unions, such as the United Auto Workers, demonstrate close alignment with economic interests. Trade agreements which would increase import competition usually engender strong opposition from these unions. The position of other unions is less intuitive. Public sector unions, such as

teacher and firefighter unions, along with service sector unions have sometimes expressed opposition to free trade agreements, either in solidarity with unions which face import competition or in support of non-trade issues, such as labor reform. For example, the US-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement received fierce opposition from service sector unions due to alleged labor repression in Colombia. While unions could push independent positions towards free trade agreements, many US unions are affiliated with larger groupings such as the AFL-CIO. Member unions of these larger groupings usually adopt the position of the umbrella organization, out of solidarity with members who face risks from trade. These umbrella organizations also champion a broad set of interests held by member unions. A commonality across trade agreements was the AFL-CIO's stated concern for labor rights, environmental protection, gender equality, and job security.

The positions of labor unions are evidently complex based on factors ranging from a union's affiliation and the nature of the industries they represent. However, governments can use the contents of negotiations to alleviate labor opposition and build coalitions in support of free trade. By including labor and environmental chapters, governments can gain support from unions which primarily care about these issues to mitigate opposition from opposed unions. For example, NAFTA renegotiation saw the initial push for stronger labor chapters which received cautious union support. However, once the text of the agreement was publicized, unions moved again into opposition because the labor chapter was perceived as weak.

Implications

This project holds important lessons for today's evolving trade politics. Free trade has become increasingly contentious in the West, and especially in the US. National security concerns and anti-globalization voices have moved to the fore. The interests of organized labor can provide a lens to understand how we got here, where we are going, and how we can direct the future of trade.

News archives demonstrate a deep sense of betrayal felt by US organized labor. Anti-globalization sentiment emerged piecemeal, following various agreements which many labor groups saw as disadvantageous to the global working class. Trade agreements which are perceived as negatively impacting workers will continue to generate grievances which spill over into other issue areas. At the same time, these groups have also demonstrated a consistent concern for labor and environmental standards, while recognizing mutual competitive-advantage benefits of free trade. As such, governments can use non-trade issues to pursue two non-exclusive, and mutually beneficial objectives. Pursuing strong labor or environmental provisions can both build domestic coalitions in favor of free trade while promoting positive change abroad, if these measures are sufficiently strong.