

# Renewing the Labor Union and Library

## Partnership through LIS Education

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**ABSTRACT:** Library and information science (LIS) and labor unions have a long history of partnership in the United States of America (U.S.A.). Since the early days of libraries, they have supported labor unions through providing access to computers, Internet access, labor-focused displays and programming, and materials that support workers. Labor unions have played a large role in supporting library workers through unionized staff, increasing library wages, worker safety and protection, and protecting against unsafe labor practices. In recent years, the partnership between libraries and unions has weakened through legislation and changes in service from both groups. With law changes that effectively made every state in the U.S.A. a right-to-work state, there is a greater importance on libraries and labor unions renewing their partnership and focus to ensure workers inside and outside of libraries have their best interests protected. Education can be a solution to this issue. Labor education in LIS programs is lacking and could be better integrated into the LIS graduate program curriculum. This article looks at the historical work between libraries and labor unions with a turn toward how these two groups can work together, with a foundation established in LIS programs, to restrengthen the partnership in today's economic and political landscape.

**Keywords:** Labor unions, libraries, LIS education, MLIS, librarians, unionization, partnerships



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## Introduction and Historical Overview

When one thinks of groups that have played a significant role in US educational and workforce history, groups may come to mind such as colleges and universities, public schools, manufacturers, and farmers, among others. Two other notable groups for this article are labor unions and libraries.

American libraries first had a presence during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but they were mainly accessible locally and not widespread (Rubin, 2016). Some examples include Harvard University, which first hired a librarian in 1667, and Benjamin Franklin's early social and subscription libraries in Philadelphia in 1728 and 1731. Where public libraries are concerned, there is debate as to which came first. Peterborough, New Hampshire in 1834 "was founded by a town with the deliberate purpose of creating a free library that would be open without restrictions to all classes of the community [...]" (Shera, 1965, p. 165 as cited in Rubin, 2016, p. 57). The first major public library followed in Boston, Massachusetts in 1854 (Rubin, 2016).

In the case of labor unions, journeymen were needed in a variety of trades as early as Colonial America to move things forward (Dubofsky, 2017). By the close of the eighteenth century, these journeymen began to form local trade societies. However, the first attempt to form a national labor union to take political action occurred in August 1866 with the formation of the National Labor Union (Dubofsky, 2017). Understanding the foundational history for both libraries and labor groups sets the stage for how long these two groups have worked together.

In the early twentieth century, Andrew Carnegie and the Carnegie Foundation began gifting communities the necessary funding to establish public libraries across the US (Hubbard, 2002). However, the partnership was not without controversy. Workers felt that their wages were being decreased to pay for this gift, while their taxes were increased to help sustain the gifted Carnegie public libraries. From the library perspective, Christine Pawley (1998) discussed how the Carnegie Corporation also influenced LIS education in a pro-capitalist fashion. Funding was provided for library development, in support of the American Library Association (ALA), and for the establishment of the Graduate Library School at the University of Chicago. A more recent example of corporate support occurred with the University of Michigan and support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (Pawley, 1998). In the 1920s and 1930s, labor unions formed trade schools that the library could naturally lend support (Sparanese, 2002). The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 further cemented worker rights in setting a 40-hour work week and giving workers access to overtime pay (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011). There was even a Labor Extension Bill proposed by Congress in the 1940s that ultimately failed which would have provided "funds for educational activities, the major purpose of which was to stimulate public libraries to expand their services to labor groups" (Soltow, 1984, p. 164).

Labor unions and libraries have been linked together in an official capacity since the ALA and the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) formed a partnership. According to Hubbard (2002), in October 1945, the

ALA Executive Board authorized the AFL-CIO/ALA Joint Committee on Library Service to Labor Groups. It became a standing committee in July 1950, and this partnership still exists today.

In 1962, President John F. Kennedy issued Executive Order 10988 which allowed federal employees to organize for negotiation (Latham & Ditzler, 2010). The Executive Order opened the door to more public entities to begin organizing unions, such as at UC Berkeley where librarians “were the first public academic librarians in the United States to form a union” (Phillips et al., 2019, p. 349).

However, a 1976 survey by Kathleen Imhoff and Larry Brandwein showed that libraries supporting unions were on the decline, with less libraries having specialized collections and services to labor communities, less staff assigned to labor groups, and an overall lower number of libraries actively working with the workforce. The survey also indicated that some librarians mistrusted unions and their motives. It is noted that, during the same time of this survey, libraries in general had stopped offering specialized services to any groups. Soltow (1984) discusses renewed efforts between ALA and the AFL-CIO and states that support “is especially necessary today because of the current milieu in which more rapidly changing technologies and deeper economic recessions pose tremendous problems for workers” (p. 167). That quote stands out in that it sounds similar to the issues faced today in reconnecting libraries and labor groups amid the divisive atmosphere in the US.

In “Public Employee Union Challenges,” Suzanne Crampton and John Hodge (2014) discuss the shift in labor unions from more blue-collar to white-collar workers. Over the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty first century white-collar workers shifted to mostly union workers, with gender membership being split close to 50-50, away from previously predominately male memberships. The gender split for union membership is notable for the library profession because recent Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022) show that librarians are still made up of just over 82 percent women and libraries are the most unionized profession (AFL-CIO Department for Professional Employees, n.d.). As the shift from blue-collar to white-collar happens, one can acknowledge that union members are more educated than they have been in the past. While overall union membership has decreased, public sector union membership increased (Crampton & Hodge, 2014). Crampton and Hodge (2014) note that public sector employees are generally compensated more than their private sector counterparts, and this shows the importance of labor unions for public library workers and reflects the blue-collar to white-collar transition of organized labor. In terms of strategies to combat these challenges, public unions have several positives going for them. Younger workers and workers of color have a more favorable view of unions and are an increasing majority of the workforce, while the overall public has a favorable view of public institutions (Crampton & Hodge, 2014).

In a shift for labor unions in recent times, Kathleen de la Peña McCook and Elaine Harger (2019) highlight the challenges stemming from the 2018 Supreme Court decision in *Janus v. AFSCME*, which ended unions’ right to collect dues of all bargaining unit members regardless of whether someone joined the union or not. The Supreme Court decision makes all states “right to work” states. The changing political landscape, in turn, has an impact on the library profession. Librarians must be equipped

to handle the changing landscape through the education received in ALA-accredited MLIS programs.

Setting the stage for today, the AFL-CIO's Department for Professional Employees (n.d.), reported in 2020 that there were over 264 thousand people in the U.S. employed in library-related positions, with these same workers making up the highest unionization rate for any professional occupation group at 35.9 percent with 25.7 percent of librarians as union members. Those numbers suggest that unions still have a place in libraries, and that libraries can still work alongside labor organizations for the betterment of all parties involved.

In the face of today's legislation, labor education in MLIS programs can be a step toward restrengthening the relationship between libraries and labor. In this article, a mixed method approach is used to begin to answer the following questions:

1. How many online ALA-accredited MLIS programs offer specializations or courses that connect to labor unions?
2. Out of those online ALA-accredited MLIS programs, how many of these schools also offer online coursework in labor education through other programs or initiatives at the same university?

A total of 43 U.S. online ALA-accredited MLIS programs are examined to gather data that is helpful in answering these questions. Prior to examining the MLIS programs, a literature review is provided to give the reader a foundational understanding of how labor unions and libraries have worked together throughout the years and to present the impact of unions on libraries.

## **Libraries Supporting Unions**

Meyers (1999) wrote that "Retired unionists are also frequently active volunteers in literacy programs, United Way agencies, or other community services. While some may not be personal library users, they do vote [...]" (p. 52). The relationship between libraries and unions, therefore, can extend beyond support just when workers are on the job. The John Sessions Memorial Award was established in 1979 to present "an award to a library that has made significant effort to work with the labor community" (Meyers, 1999, p. 53). As of 2023, the award is still being given annually, with Princeton University's Industrial Relations Library being the most recent recipient. Suggestions have been made to designate a staff member as a union liaison, as well as to integrate union service activity into library long range plans and mission statements. Libraries can offer support to unions through providing free meeting room space, as well as offering a mix of informational materials on laws and regulations where unions are concerned. Libraries give unions a space where they can advertise information and programs on bulletin boards, websites, newsletters, or literature displayed within the building. Meyers (1999) concludes by stating that "Librarians can also advise labor groups on developing their own libraries" (p. 55).

Libraries have stepped up over time to fill a void where services to the unemployed workers are concerned. It is recommended that libraries take part in existing Union

Counselor Training programs to let workers know the resources and services in which they can lend support (Sparanese, 2002). Labor History Month was established by Bill Clinton in 1995 for the month of May, which lends itself well to library programming and initiatives. Further notable examples include the growth of labor and employment collections libraries in Englewood, New Jersey, and Seattle. The Friends of the Library in St. Paul, Minnesota put on programs during Labor History Month. Libraries in Bridgeport, Connecticut and Lodi, New Jersey are also mentioned for the work they did on digital and historical labor collections online. Libraries allow Internet access for working families to reach out to community, state, or national officials, and allow them to organize if they otherwise would not have access to this information (Sparanese, 2002).

According to Williams (2002), Service Employees International Union (SEIU) is North America's largest union with more than 400,000 members providing public services including libraries. Libraries assist working families in their efforts to improve their situations and communities through access to websites, email, and Internet technologies. Librarians can provide working families with the training necessary to reach out to officials and make an impact in their communities. Libraries provide resources for families and put together guides to assist with research. Libraries also offer classes to help working families with things such as adult education, English as a Second Language (ESL), or literacy training. SEIU, in conjunction with libraries, offers local unions space to put together websites that can be maintained through library Internet access. Their efforts to bridge the digital divide has led to collective bargaining that resulted in SEIU members gaining access to home computers, Internet, and additional technologies at a reduced or free price (Williams, 2002).

## **The Impact of Unions on Libraries**

Unions also have impacted libraries. James Tracy and Maris Hayashi (2010) conducted a survey to explore unions and workplace rights in Florida's public universities. The survey was sent out to 363 academic librarians in 2009 with a response rate of 58 librarians representing 11 public universities comprising part of a statewide faculty union. Survey results included that 72 percent of librarians saw themselves as professionals rather than mere library workers. The survey also found that most of the respondents were members of professional librarian organizations, but they question the effectiveness of these organizations. Most respondents felt that the union presence had a positive impact on their jobs, but most took the hands-off approach in only paying dues but not participating in meetings and similar. Tracy and Hayashi (2010) concluded that these workers can build a stronger and healthier work culture with the support of the union.

Lin Schnell and Anne Cisney (2012) from the Seattle Public Library shared an example of how library administration, library staff, and a union can successfully work together. They outlined the commitment from both the Seattle Public Library administration and its labor union to maintain a positive working environment. They began working toward this goal a decade before their writing in signing their first Labor-Management Partnership Agreement. This shift took some time to get used to, in that library administration and the union had been more adversarial in the past. An addendum was later added that outlined the guiding principles that this agreement

operates under. One of the benefits of this partnership agreement included involving all staff members in the process of figuring out how to save the library money for budget reductions. Further positive outcomes from this agreement include involving all sides in the organizational structure of the library as well as more upfront communication. Schnell and Cisney (2012) noted that the library established a Workplace Environment Committee with staff members from different parts of the library as well as union representatives. This committee came up with shared values to influence service in the library. These values include respect, transparency, partnership, diversity, engagement, and recognition. Further projects that have come out of this committee include an annual employee recognition program, and the launching of an online discussion forum to share ideas.

Stavroula Harissis (2017) looked at the nature of libraries and how they have evolved to continue to meet the needs of those they serve. Libraries have gone from just being a place to check out books to offering a multitude of digital offerings, and community building efforts. Political and economic conditions, however, also play a significant role in libraries being able to show their value. Libraries are consistently underfunded. According to statistics, 82 percent of people in the U.S. support public libraries, with 83 percent having used libraries in their lifetime and 49 percent having used libraries in the past year. Harissis noted that we are in a period defined by a neoliberalism in which the government strengthens the private sector and weakens the public sector. To fight against the weakening of the public sector, the Chicago Public Library workers organized a protest with their union, garnering media attention and putting pressure on the mayor and city council to curtail the budget cuts to the library system (Harissis, 2017). The Chicago example showcases the need for library staff to stop being neutral and take a side in the political and economic reality that surrounds them.

Chloe Mills and Ian McCullough (2018) surveyed 359 academic librarians in the U.S. to inquire about their views on unions and collective bargaining agreements. The survey was completed in mid-to-late 2015 with a total of 39 percent of respondents drawn from current union members. There was a strong correlation between librarians with faculty status, particularly tenure-faculty, and union membership. More than 50 percent of respondents reporting as not being union members said that they at least sometimes wished they were part of a union, while less than 20 percent wished they were not part of a union. Finally, the authors found that over half of the respondents felt that the union had a positive impact on salary (with union member librarians responding to the survey having higher salaries) and benefits, administration protection, and job security (Mills & McCullough, 2018).

According to Carrie Smith (2019), data from the AFL-CIO in 2017 indicated that union library staff earned on average 31 percent more per week than non-union library staff. Unions are important both in contract negotiations and in settling disputes between library staff and administration. There is even room to negotiate better pay within the confines of a union. Smith (2019) wrote that unions also tackle topics such as professional development funding, working conditions, and intellectual freedom protections. Joining a union is a personal choice, but membership is a way to improve existing conditions if workers are unhappy with the administration or the current union in place. In the public sector, even those that are

non-members have their rights recognized as part of a union. In the private sector, Smith (2019) wrote, rights are set by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), public workers outside of the federal government are at the mercy of state level laws. The National Labor Relations Act was established by Congress in 1935 with the NLRB (National Labor Relations Board, n.d.).

Kelly McElroy and Diana Castillo (2022) share successes they experienced through their unionization efforts at Oregon State University. The authors recognize a resurgence in unionization after years of declining union membership, which is important to make note of in restrengthening the partnership between libraries and labor unions. The United Academics Oregon State University (UAOSU) union formed after 18 months of bargaining, two years after certifying the union, and six years after initial meetings began to discuss the idea of unionization. The authors make the point that President Biden's administration is more union-friendly, and the NLRB is currently exploring the potential to make unions easier to form. Lessons learned include that unionization may be a tool against vocational awe, that library skills are union skills (and vice versa), and the importance of faculty role for librarians (McElroy & Castillo, 2022).

All the examples touched on in this section and the previous section show not just the impact that unions can have for library workers and the benefits that result from having a union partnership in library workers' corner. They also show the multitude of ways in which libraries have supported and worked with labor unions in their service areas. Whether fighting for better working conditions, higher wages, or to have worker voices heard, unions still have a place in libraries in today's climate in the U.S.A. As seen with *Janus v. AFSCME* in 2018, the knowledge of librarians becomes critical as legislation continues to target unions; this is where labor education in MLIS programs comes into play.

## Method

To investigate labor studies in LIS education, the researcher used a mixed methods approach in both data collection and analysis and observations, employing freely available information found on ALA-accredited online MLIS program websites. Data was also collected as to whether universities offering online MLIS programs offered separate online labor education programs. Data collection and analysis focused only on those accredited programs that offered a 100 percent online option. As a starting point for this research, the ALA's (2023) directory of programs was searched with the "100 percent online program available" option checked.

The researcher observed of MLIS program websites that ALA's (2023) directory lists as offering a 100 percent online option. The observations covered freely available and accessible on content on the MLIS program websites. Observations looked at for analysis included concentrations that could tie into labor issues in libraries (i.e., management/administration as it related to personnel and not management as in information or knowledge management), as well as whether coursework covered management topics if there were no focus areas that tied into labor studies. In addition, the researcher determined if the ALA-accredited online MLIS universities had outside the program online offerings related to labor education such as a

certificate, minor, undergraduate degree, or graduate degree.

## **Results and Discussion**

Examination of the online programs in ALA's (2023) accredited MLIS program directory resulted in 45 programs for analysis. The focus of this study was only on the U.S, so the University of Alberta from Canada and the U.S. non-incorporated territory University of Puerto Rico were excluded. Limiting the results to only U.S. online MLIS programs left the focus on 43 programs, as seen in Table 1. Shahvar and Tang (2022) agreed with this finding that there are 43 ALA-accredited MLIS programs being offered 100 percent online. Table 1 lists the U.S. programs are listed in alphabetical order by the state in which they are located.



1	Alabama, University of
2	Arizona, University of
3	San Jose State University
4	Southern California, University of
5	Denver, University of
6	Southern Connecticut State University
7	Catholic University of America, The
8	Florida State University
9	South Florida, University of
10	Valdosta State University
11	Iowa, University of
12	Chicago State University
13	Dominican University
14	Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, University of
15	Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis
16	Kentucky, University of
17	Louisiana State University
18	Simmons University
19	Maryland, University of
20	Wayne State University
21	Missouri, University of
22	Southern Mississippi, The University of
23	East Carolina University
24	North Carolina at Greensboro, The University of
25	North Carolina Central University
26	Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
27	Albany, University at, SUNY
28	Buffalo, University at, SUNY
29	Long Island University
30	St. John's University
31	Kent State University
32	Oklahoma, University of
33	Drexel University
34	Pennsylvania Western University - Clarion
35	Pittsburgh, University of
36	Rhode Island, University of
37	South Carolina, University of
38	Tennessee, University of
39	Texas Woman's University
40	Old Dominion University
41	Washington, University of
42	Wisconsin-Madison, University of
43	Wisconsin-Milwaukee, University of

As seen in Table 2, Further results show that ten out of the 43 online MLIS programs (23.2%) offer a concentration, certificate, or area of focus that might connect to labor education. The table lists the schools in alphabetical order by the state in which they are located along with additional information about what each school offers. It should be noted that all 43 online MLIS programs offer courses relating to management-related topics, so Table 2 only reflects those that offer a specialization. The management courses being offered by all online ALA-accredited MLIS programs is not surprising given that ALA (2019) notes in the most recent revision to accreditation standards that curriculum should foster "development of library and information professionals who will assume a leadership role in providing services and collections appropriate for the communities that are served" (p. 5).

<b>Table 2:</b>	<b>Relevant Concentration, Area of Emphasis, or Certificate (Source: Data collection from online MLIS program websites)</b>
Alabama, University of	Social Justice and Inclusivity area of emphasis
Southern California, University of	Library and Information Management certificate
Florida State University	Leadership and Management program of study and Information Leadership and Management certificate
Valdosta State University	Library Management area of interest
Dominican University	Library and Information Center Administration certificate
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey	Technology, Information, and Management concentration
St. John's University	Social Justice in the Information Professions and Management for Information Professionals advanced certificates
Pittsburgh, University of	Civic Engagement thematic area
Rhode Island, University of	Libraries, Leadership, and Transforming Communities specialization, Information Equity, Diverse Communities, and Critical Librarianship specialization
Wisconsin-Madison, University of	Leadership certificate

Next, data was collected on how many of the online MLIS programs offer some type of online labor education at the same university. As seen in Table 3, eight out of 43 programs, 18.6 percent, offer online education relating to labor studies. Szymanski and Wells (2013) explained that a "labor-studies-focused college education creates scholarship that enables students to analyze the issues of the day and inspires them to take the lead in exploring alternative positions and policies" (p. 74). Exposing librarians to labor studies coursework will not only help them in their own work *Journal of Radical Librarianship*, Vol. 9 (2023) pp.187-199

experiences, it will help those community members being served.

<b>Table 3:</b>		<b>Offers Online MLIS and Online Labor Education (Source: Data collection from university website academic program listings)</b>
Dominican University		Yes - bachelors
Illinois at Urbana- Champaign, University of		Yes - undergraduate certificate, minor, masters
Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis		Yes - undergraduate certificate, associates, bachelors
Wayne State University		Yes - bachelors, masters
Missouri, University of		Yes - credit and non-credit certificate programs with some online offerings
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey		Yes - undergraduate certificate, bachelors
Oklahoma, University of		Yes - human relations masters
Wisconsin- Milwaukee, University of		Yes - non-credit, certificate

Considering the lack of information available online, it was not possible to provide an in-depth check of every course listed on the MLIS program websites. Nevertheless, there are some important takeaways from this data collection and observations. Since every online program offers courses in management, the other programs may touch on labor relations in some capacity as part of the coursework. However, it is interesting that there was not one course observed that was specifically devoted to labor studies, labor relations, or similar topics in any of the online MLIS programs.

## Conclusions

This paper provides examples of instances where libraries and labor unions have worked together over both of their long histories in the U.S. With legislative changes like right to work laws, renewing and continuing this partnership requires special attention. Considering the data collected in this article, it is proposed that MLIS library education sets a foundation in the through coursework. Such a focus will allow for more librarians to graduate with the ability to offer specialized services to labor groups in their service communities. As the data shows, online MLIS programs do not offer much to prepare librarians to work with and support union members, a group that includes librarians themselves. Special topics courses could be offered as electives to explore labor unions, the role these unions have for librarians, and the roles they play in the lives of the patrons that librarians serve. Short of that, it is imperative to ensure that this topic is integrated into management and administration coursework so as to not lose sight of this necessary partnership. Where labor focus in LIS education is concerned, future studies on this subject would

work best if data was obtainable about every course offered from every online program. It is recommended that anonymity be offered to schools in exchange for receiving course syllabi otherwise unavailable online to as a means of better understanding the course offerings. The course syllabi may show that there efforts are being made to educate tomorrow's librarians on labor issues, but no evidence was found of such education when observing information available online. Bringing the topic of labor education in LIS programs into focus will allow for a more productive partnership between libraries and labor unions and allow for the ability to thrive in the U.S.A of today.

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