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# How Do The Perceptions of Wages, Benefits, and Working Conditions Differ Among Unionized Mechanical Construction Workers in Right-to-Work and Non-Right-to-Work States?

Todd McKeever

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HOW DO THE PERCEPTIONS OF WAGES, BENEFITS, AND WORKING CONDITIONS  
DIFFER AMONG UNIONIZED MECHANICAL CONSTRUCTION WORKERS IN  
RIGHT-TO-WORK AND NON-RIGHT-TO-WORK STATES?

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Todd M. McKeever

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

December 2018

Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
School of Graduate Studies and Research  
Department of Sociology

We hereby approve the dissertation of

Todd M. McKeever

Candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

---

Michael T. Korn, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Employment and Labor  
Relations, Advisor

---

Christian A. Vaccaro, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Sociology

---

David B. Yerger, Ph.D.  
Professor of Economics

ACCEPTED

---

Randy L. Martin, Ph.D.  
Dean  
School of Graduate Studies and Research

Title: How Do the Perceptions of Wages, Benefits, and Working Conditions Differ Among Unionized Mechanical Construction Workers in Right-to-Work and Non-Right-to-Work States?

Author: Todd M. McKeever

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Michael T. Korn

Dissertation Committee: Dr. Christian A. Vaccaro  
Dr. David B. Yerger

This qualitative study seeks to better understand how union member's perceptions of wages, benefits, and working conditions differ from those living and working in a Right-to-Work state and those in a Non-Right-to-Work state. Union workers from the mechanical construction industry in the Right-to-Work states of Nebraska, Nevada, and Texas, the Non-Right-to-Work states of Colorado, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, and the recently Right-to-Work transitioned state of West Virginia provide the data and setting for this study. One-on-one semi-structured interviews with Business Managers of United Association of Plumbers and Pipe-Fitters unions located within these seven states, along with focus group sessions with union members in each state, were conducted over a four-month period.

The research identified the following themes through study participant responses; Wage Satisfaction and Benefits, Employee and Employer Relationship: Worker Appreciation and Feedback, Work Environment and Job Site Safety, Anti-Union Sentiment, Implication of Right-to-Work, Being a Union Member in a Right-to-Work State, and Concerns for the Future.

Study findings confirm that union workers in Right-to-Work states perceive their wage as low, but their perception is influenced by how successful they think company owners are through the purchases they make, such as nice homes, vehicles, and vacations. Participants in Right-to-Work states experience a high degree of anti-union sentiment on job-sites and among the general public. A finding of particular interest is union workers in Right-to-Work states

have formed a sincere appreciation for being a union member knowing how difficult it is because of the legislation being in place and the anti-union sentiment within their state.

This study is applicable to any union within the United States and can provide insight to employers in regards to how union workers perceive their workplace. State government representatives, that are considering passing Right-to-Work legislation, can gain insight to how the legislation may impact their state's employers and workers.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my wife Susan and son Eli. Susan, you have provided me with unwavering support throughout my years of course work, research, and writing in the completion of my Ph.D. I could not have done it without you. Thank you and I love you. Eli, you have provided me with such positive internal motivation to do well, succeed, and to achieve this personal goal. You have brought unimaginable joy to my life and I love you. Thank you both for your love and support.

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A big thank you to my fellow IUP Cohort; Don, Carla, Amy, Jennifer, and Jake, whose friendship and support meant a lot to me over these past number of years. Having each of you be a part of this journey has made it so much more memorable and enjoyable.

I deeply appreciate the support from the Laurel Mechanical Contractors Association Board of Directors for their full support during my research. I hope this study provides important insight about the mechanical construction industry.

Without the love and support of Susan and Eli I could not have achieved this goal. Thank you and I love you both. Thank you to family and friends who provided continued encouragement throughout this process.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTON

#### **Introduction and Overview**

A job is a significant part of who a person is and how they define themselves. It also provides a living for themselves and their family. The wages a person is paid to perform their job, the types of employee benefits provided, and the overall working conditions all have an influence of how employees perceive their job, work environment, and employer. How an employee perceives their job and factors related to compensation and working conditions are important to understand as they will affect overall job performance and their working relationship with employers. There are a number of factors that influence worker perceptions of their wages, benefits, and working conditions, such as pay level, quality of benefits, internal equity, external competition, job safety, and union influence. In this study I investigate union worker perceptions of their wages, benefits, and working conditions. Furthermore, I examine the relationship between union workers in Right-to-Work (RTW) states and those in non-Right-to-Work (NRTW) states to determine the influence this status may have on worker perceptions.

RTW legislation prohibits requiring any individual worker from becoming a member of a union as a condition of employment. RTW is widely seen as an anti-union piece of legislation that favors employers and provides a pro-business climate in states that have enacted the law. There have been numerous studies conducted on worker perceptions regarding their compensation along with countless studies on wage and benefit differences among employees in RTW and NRTW states, but little research on how RTW status affects employee perceptions.

## **Purpose**

This qualitative study researches the subject matter of union mechanical construction trade worker perceptions of their wages, benefits, and working conditions. The union worker perceptions are compared from those who are in a Right-to-Work (RTW) state and those who are employed in a Non-Right-to-Work (NRTW) state. The purpose of the study is to better understand how Right-to-Work legislation and regulations impact the perceptions union workers have regarding their wages, benefits, and working conditions.

## **Research Questions**

In this study, the researcher seeks to better understand how union workers in a Right-to-Work state perceive their wages, benefits, and working conditions differently than union workers in a NRTW state. Study participants' perception differences were determined and viewed by comparing individual responses obtained through interview and focus group sessions. This study examines the influence that RTW status has on union mechanical construction worker perceptions towards key elements of their work environment. Union members who are working in a RTW state have been making a living in an environment that has been predominantly pro-business creating a sense of anti-management sentiment among the rank and file (Hennessey, 2017). It should be noted that it is possible that union worker perceptions, from those who are in a RTW state, may be positive due to the realization that as a union member in a RTW state, they understand and appreciate the higher wages and benefits in a pro-employer and anti-union environment.

Union workers in both RTW and NRTW states were asked to discuss their perceptions on their wages, benefits, and working conditions. This enabled the researcher to consider how their state's RTW status had any influence on those perceptions. Since the selected unions for this

study were building trades and skilled labor workers who had similar jobs and tasks within the mechanical construction industry, each was asked the same questions. Each individual has had similar experiences with the only key difference being their state's RTW status. Union business managers were interviewed individually to obtain their perceptions of wages, benefits, and working conditions, in addition to their input on their union membership. The selected focus groups were provided the opportunity to elaborate on their perceptions of their wages, benefits, and working conditions in order for the researcher to better understand what they are and why they have them. The focus groups were also be asked about their comprehension of their state's RTW status to determine their understanding of the legislation and how it relates to their overall work environment. Focus groups were selected based upon the individual being an active union mechanical construction worker currently in the field.

The research question driving this study is:

*“How do the Perceptions of Wages, Benefits, and Working Conditions Differ among Unionized Mechanical Construction Workers in Right-to-Work and Non-Right-to-Work States?”*

Additional questions this research will attempt to answer are:

- 1) How does Right-to-Work status influence unionized mechanical construction worker perceptions of their wages?
- 2) How does Right-to-Work status influence unionized construction workers perceptions of their benefits?
- 3) How does Right-to-Work status influence unionized mechanical construction workers perceptions of their working conditions?

## **Assumptions**

Following are assumptions the researcher had going into this study:

Assumption 1: Union workers in Right-to-Work states have a more positive perception of unionized mechanical construction workers' compensation and work environment than those union workers in NRTW states.

Assumption 2: There is a more anti-union environment for mechanical construction unions in Right-to-Work states than there is for mechanical construction unions in non-Right-to-Work states.

Assumption 3: Pro-employer sentiment, as a result of legal and business environment, in Right-to-Work states influences union mechanical construction worker perceptions regarding their wages, benefits, and working conditions.

Assumption 4: Pro-union sentiment, as a result of legal and business environment, in non-Right-to-Work states influences union mechanical construction worker perceptions regarding their wages, benefits, and working conditions.

## **Social Exchange Theory**

The theoretical approach for this study is Social Exchange Theory. Social Exchange Theory states that an individual will choose certain behaviors in social and workplace situations that maximize their self-interest, such as joining and being affiliated with certain groups. The theory assumes that individuals are rational and understand the cost and benefits related to an exchange taking place (Cole, Schaninger, & Harris, 2002). The theory proposes that individuals will react positively to situations and treatment that benefits them while react negatively to those they see as unfavorable (Blau, 1964). Continued exchange behaviors that occur over time that result in desired payoffs will lead to a pattern and systematic processes of social and workplace

interactions (Cole, Schaninger, & Harris, 2002). This continued element of Social Exchange Theory is applicable to this study because of the labor and management relationship between the union and employer. The collective bargaining process and the continual negotiating of wages, benefits, and working conditions taking place from contract to contract likely has a direct impact on union workers perceptions. When researching matters related to employee wages, benefits, and the workplace, having an understanding of individual behaviors and decisions making, it provides valuable insight to union mechanical workers' perceptions.

Social Exchange Theory suggests that individuals conduct themselves in a certain manner in order to obtain a desired result, such as come to work on time, work hard, and be productive. Within the workplace, Social Exchange Theory states that employees enter a formal transaction with an employer to perform certain tasks and behave in a proper manner so that they will receive compensation (Calhoun, Gerteis, Moody, Pfaff & Virk, 2007). Individuals make a living and provide for themselves and their families through the wages and benefits provided by their employer. Exchange Theory is a formal transaction between parties involved, such as money for consumer products, or wages for labor. It is critical that each party see the exchange as proportional to their contribution (Homans, 1961). Factored into the transactional exchange concept is the element of personal characteristics such as appreciation, loyalty, and trust between the parties involved. Blau (1964) concluded that an employee's perception of the quality of their benefits has a direct influence on the worker's sense of the quality of their exchange with the employer. A benefit is additional compensation provided to an employee beyond an hourly wage or salary (Kelil, 2010). Lambert (2000) indicated that fringe benefits do influence workers, but to the degree to which the exchange affects them depends upon the value of the



exchange. The higher quality of benefits being provided to the individual the greater influence it will have on their perception of the compensation.

Social Exchange Theory enables both parties in the exchange to be seen as having a continual relationship that builds over time and does not simply end once the exchange is completed. As two parties maintain an ongoing exchange relationship, a joint interdependence between them is formed, which results in mutual support (Blau, 1964). It is the notion of relationship building between parties where Social Exchange Theory sheds light on labor and management relations and how unions and their employers function together. Social exchange can lead to a long term relationship with inherent commitment by both parties (Shore, Tetrick, Lynch, & Barksdale, 2006). For reasons such as the collective bargaining agreement, need for skilled labor, employment, and successful completion of construction projects, employers and their unionized workforce are interdependent. Social Exchange Theory emphasizes the need for groups to find equilibrium. Equilibrium is met when groups form similar behaviors as a result of member influences to conform (Calhoun, Gerteis, Moody, Pfaff & Virk, 2007). It is this influence to conform that creates the ongoing working relationship between organized labor and contractor trade associations. The exchange of wages and benefits for a worker's labor is a transaction, but an organizational structure that involves a union, and the ongoing relationship building that takes place during contract negotiations, can explain some of the perceptions that union members have towards those compensation items. The influence of having formal union representation and the unions ongoing relationship with industry signatory employers is a defining factor for this study because of how it affects worker perceptions.

Social Exchange Theory helps to explain how individuals form loyalty to social units, such as unions. As a result of this social unit loyalty, there will be activities among the unit

members that become the norm as it supports the greater good of the unit (Shore, Tetrick, Sinclair, & Newton, 1994). It is within the set norms among the unit members where the individuals and their leaders provide influence. Unit norms influence unit members and shared perceptions of jointly held exchange items, such as wages and benefits, can be formed among workers as result of being union members. Although the factors of having a contract and financial exchanges between union workers and their employers indicate a clear transactional relationship, the unit norms that are formed within the union environment and continual mutual need to have a working relationship between parties can best be explained best through the Social Exchange Theory.

Social Exchange Theory concept evolved from a solely transactional exchange relationship between two parties and further incorporated the shared dependence between the parties and the bonds forming over time. It is this interdependence that produces shared commitment of goals that influence individual member behavior and perceptions. As a group of individuals maintain a constant relationship among one another there is social learning that takes place through repetitive interaction and involvement with one another through systematic gatherings and events (Calhoun, Gerteis, Moody, Pfaff & Virk, 2007). As those shared interactions and joint goals lead to achieving goals they enhance relationships among the employees. As relationships continue to foster, through the social exchange process, so does the union workers' relationship with their employer. This results in a form of membership where individuals gain identity and esteem (Eisenberger, Jones, Aselage, & Sucharski, 2004). It is these continued social exchanges between the grouping of workers and their employer that goes beyond transactional exchanges and becomes more of a social exchange.

In conclusion, as relationships are incorporated into social exchange it leads theorists to begin to consider how these continued social interactions between groups of employees and their employers influence individual perceptions on issues jointly held among all parties. Employee perceptions regarding wages, benefits, and working conditions are individually held however Social Exchange Theory enables theorists to consider how continued group interaction and joint activities influence each employee's perceptions. Inherent in the relationship between union workers and their employers are an exchange of work product and the providing of wage and benefits for labor. Although Social Exchange Theory may not explain the full or direct influence of Right-to-Work legislation on the study participants, it will provide valuable insight on the overall perceptions of the union workers.

### **Right-to-Work Background**

The National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) was passed into law in 1935. The NLRA, also known as the Wagner Act, provides employees the right to organize and form a union, the right to not join a union, to collectively bargain with their employer, and to strike. Included in the act are a number of unfair labor practices focusing on what the employers can and can't do, mainly not interfering with organizing efforts and refusal to bargain in "good faith" (Carrell & Heavrin, 2007). The law ultimately created employers that are "closed shops" and "union shops". A closed shop employer is required to hire union members while a union shop employer can hire anyone but the worker would have to join the union and pay membership dues (Shannon, 2014). The original NLRA had a predominantly pro-labor emphasis (Craver, 2010). In an effort to balance the rights of employees with the rights of the employer, the Taft-Hartley Act was passed into law in 1947. The Taft-Hartley Act, also known as the Labor-Management Relations Act, essentially amended the NLRA to include a number of unfair labor practices

towards union and worker activities within the workplace. The law also provides rights for individual employees in contrast to just those rights towards unionized workers (Sloane & Witney, 1991). With passage of the Taft-Hartley Act the workplace rights of employers and their employees became more balanced.

The Taft-Hartley amendments to the National Labor Relations Act enable individual states to pass laws prohibiting the mandatory requirement for workers to pay union dues. Within a short period of passage of the Taft-Hartley Act, 12 states enacted this provision, which is referred to as Right-to-Work laws (RTW). By the end of 2015 there were 25 states with RTW laws in place, mainly states located in the mid-west, south, and southwest (Gould & Kimball, 2015). In 2015, Wisconsin became the 25th RTW state when Governor Scott Walker signed the legislation into law. In 2016, West Virginia enacted RTW legislation and became the 28<sup>th</sup> state to do so. It is the RTW provision of the law, and its influence on union worker perceptions of their work environment, that is the focus of this study.

RTW prohibits requiring any individual to become a union member as a condition of employment. This stipulation in the law effectively increases the cost of how a union operates, particularly as it relates to organizing new members. When union membership is not a condition of employment the union needs to allocate more time and resources to attract new members and grow the union (Kalenkoski & Lacomber, 2006). A key benefit to being a union member is having formal representation in the workplace. Taft-Hartley amendments do state that a “fair share fee” can be charged to employees who may benefit from union representation, even if they are not members (Carrell & Heavrin, 2007). Non-union workers who have segments of the workplace that are unionized, tend to have higher wage and benefit levels because of those co-workers who have formal collective bargaining representation (Bivens, et al., 2017). Fair share

fees enable unions to obtain some financial contribution from non-members because of the positive influence the union has on their wage and benefits.

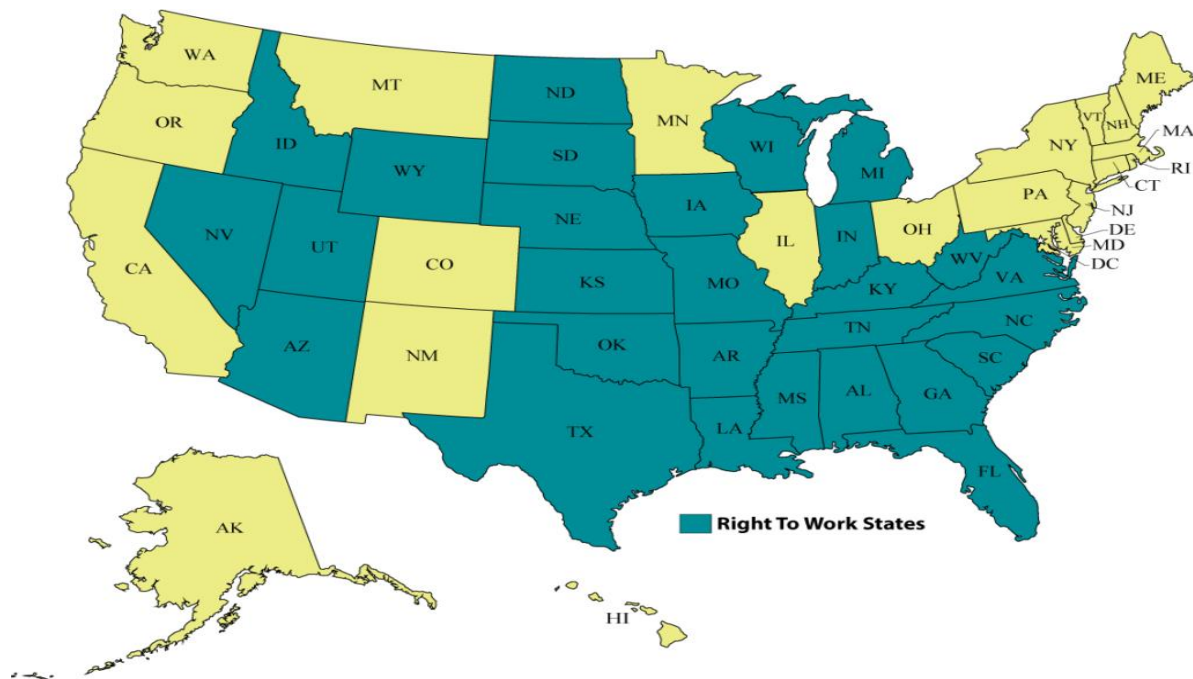
Right-to-Work prohibits unions from requiring workers to pay union dues and related administrative fees as a condition of employment. Not being able to require members to pay union dues creates a category of workers who receive the benefits of collective representation without contributing their share of union dues. Union workers who do not pay union dues but receive benefits of being a member of the union are called “free riders” (Baird, 2013). A free rider receives a net positive from their union representation because they are not paying their fair share into the union organization. In RTW states, where a union member chooses not to pay into union dues, because as a free rider they know they will receive the benefits of representation, they are considered “true free riders” (Sobel, 1995). This has a negative operational effect on a union because this category of member is not contributing financially towards having representation although Sobel (1995) concluded that the impact is minimal as only 30 % of members in a RTW state are free riders. It is important to note for this study that the issue of free riders is nonexistent because the unionized construction trade consists of a hiring hall where members are called out to work for various signatory contractors and are not solely working for one stand-alone employer.

RTW does not make becoming a union member a condition of employment or mandate that workers pay union dues. Not requiring union members to pay union dues creates added difficulty for unions to obtain the funds to operate their organization. It also results in unions in RTW states needing to allocate more financial resources for union member organizing campaigns. Increasing the operating cost of running a union, organizing members, and decreasing the bargaining leverage is seen as pro-business and anti-union measures (Craver,

2010). The effect that RTW legislation has on union density, union organizing efforts, economic conditions, and industrial development within states has been studied extensively over the years. Numerous studies have been conducted on employee perceptions regarding their work environment, working conditions, and attitudes towards unions. This study provides information about union worker perceptions of their compensation, benefits, and working conditions and determine the effect of RTW legislation has on those perceptions.

### Right-to-Work Information and Statistics

The following information will provide demographic and statistical detail on which states have enacted the law and when, along with data on union membership percentages of the overall workforce within each state of the country.



*Figure 1. Right-to-work and non-right-to-work states as of 2017. Reprinted from National Conference of State Legislatures. (2017). Right-to-Work resources. Retrieved from [www.ncsl.org/research/labor-and-employment/right-to-work-laws-and-bills.aspx#chart](http://www.ncsl.org/research/labor-and-employment/right-to-work-laws-and-bills.aspx#chart).*

State	Year Statute Enacted
Florida	1943
Arizona	1947
Arkansas	1947
Georgia	1947
Iowa	1947
Nebraska	1947
North Carolina	1947
North Dakota	1947
South Dakota	1947
Tennessee	1947
Virginia	1947
Nevada	1952
Alabama	1953
Mississippi	1954

State	Year Statute Enacted
South Carolina	1954
Utah	1955
Kansas	1958
Wyoming	1963
Louisiana	1976
Idaho	1985
Texas	1993
Oklahoma	2001
Indiana	2012
Michigan	2012
Wisconsin	2015
West Virginia	2016
Kentucky	2017
Missouri	2017

*Figure 2. Right-to-work by state and year of enactment (Chronological in ascending order).*  
 Reprinted from U.S. Department of Labor, Wage, and Hour. (2017). Retrieved from <http://www.dol.gov/whd/righttowork.htm>.

State	Total Employed	Represented by Unions		State	Total Employed	Represented by Unions	
		Total in thousands	% of Employed			Non-Right-to-Work	Total in thousands
Alabama	1,863	170	9.0	Alaska	304	59	19.9
Arizona	2,661	151	5.5	California	15,657	2,796	17.5
Arkansas	1,155	59	5.0	Colorado	2,310	263	10.8
Florida	7,994	574	7.1	Connecticut	1,587	288	18.4
Georgia	4,016	210	4.9	Delaware	412	56	13.3
Idaho	679	47	6.8	District of Columbia	334	37	10.7
Indiana	2,828	335	11.4	Hawaii	583	125	20.9
Iowa	1,435	153	10.5	Illinois	5,566	856	15.3
Kansas	1,255	132	10.3	Maine	549	77	13.5
Kentucky	1,705	228	13.4	Maryland	2,757	347	12.3
Louisiana	1,847	88	4.9	Massachusetts	3,103	407	12.9
Mississippi	1,103	90	8.1	Michigan	4,083	651	15.5
Missouri	2,615	290	10.7	Minnesota	2,565	388	15.2
Nebraska	882	74	8.5	Montana	427	58	13.9
Nevada	1,232	182	15.0	New Hampshire	641	74	11.0
North Carolina	4,089	174	4.1	New Jersey	3,880	666	16.6
North Dakota	352	25	7.0	New Mexico	782	64	8.2
Oklahoma	1,567	97	6.6	New York	8,249	2,075	25.2
South Carolina	1,960	52	2.6	Ohio	4,914	702	14.1
South Dakota	382	26	7.0	Oregon	1,586	267	15.8
Tennessee	2,693	174	6.4	Pennsylvania	5,601	724	12.7
Texas	11,177	606	5.3	Rhode Island	483	81	16.9
Utah	1,274	79	6.0	Vermont	284	37	12.9
Virginia	3,736	226	6.0	Washington	2,977	577	18.7
West Virginia	665	88	13.2				
Wisconsin	2,682	244	9.0				
Wyoming	261	18	7.3				

*Figure 3. 2016 union membership by state (Right-to-work and non-right-to-work states).*  
 Reprinted from Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2017). Economic News Release: Union Members 2016. Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.nr0.html>.



With this study focusing on union worker perceptions it is important to have a clear understanding of the current status of unionized employees in the workplace today. Figure 3 provides an overview of percentage of workers who are a member of a union within each of the United States. In 2016 10.7 % of workers in the United States were represented by a union, which was down 0.4 % from the previous year (BLS, 2017). Breaking down employees into public sector and private sector, 34.4 % of public employees are represented by a union with 6.4 % of workers in the private sector. 11.2 % of male employees are members of a union with 10.2 % of females being in a union (BLS, 2017).

In 2016, 13.9 % of workers in the construction industry were in a union, which was a 0.7% increase from 2015. In a year-over-year comparison, the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicated that the construction industry had a job increase of 379,000 workers with a total workforce of 7,488,000 workers in 2016. The level of unemployment in the construction industry remains relatively consistent at 7.4 % (BLS, 2017). At 13.9 %, the construction industry has above average percentage of unionized workers as compared to 10.7 % of workers in the United States being part of a union.

### **Significance of Study**

There is a body of literature on union worker perceptions regarding aspects of their work environment, working conditions, compensation, and job satisfaction, in addition to numerous studies on RTW laws and their impact on worker wages and economic development. Studies have been conducted on wage levels in RTW states compared to NRTW. Research shows that RTW states have a lower average hourly wage rate than states that are NRTW. Many of the studies are referenced in Chapter 2. This study's significance to the current body of literature is to consider how and in what ways a union member's state's RTW status influences their

perceptions of their wages, benefits, and working conditions. This research provides a contribution to the body of knowledge on employee perceptions of their work environment by the studies inclusion of the influence of a state's RTW status.

Studies conducted on employee perceptions of their wages, benefits, and working conditions have provided employers with useful information about their employees and their overall attitude towards their jobs and compensation. Research has also been conducted on Right-to-Work and non-Right-to-Work states focusing mainly on how wage and benefit levels are different among these two state classifications. Information and conclusions from those studies have been beneficial in understanding how the legislation has affected the state's business environment and worker pay levels. In addition to the research on wage rates, the literature review references studies on the economic impact related to RTW status of state. Studies show that RTW states are more likely to attract manufacturing companies and see growth in the private manufacturing sector than states that are NRTW.

The significance of this study is it seeks to determine how a state's RTW status affects union worker perceptions on their wages, benefits, and working conditions. Results and conclusions from this study are beneficial to union workers, employers, and their labor and management relationship. This study may provide insight to government legislators who may be considering changes to their state's RTW legislation.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to better understand union member perceptions regarding their wages, fringe benefits, and working conditions comparing union workers in a Right-to-Work (RTW) state, a non-Right-to-Work (NRTW) state, and those in a transitioned RTW state. The focus is on union workers in the heavy mechanical construction building trades industry. This literature review provides the context of existing research that sets the foundation for this study, but also identifies gaps in the existing research and how this study fills that void. The following is a literature review of studies on the effect of Right-to-Work laws and employee perceptions on working conditions and compensation that will be relevant to this study.

This literature review was conducted through online databases, including EBSCO and ProQuest, along with Google Scholar internet searches. The focus was on peer reviewed and published journal articles. Although this literature review is not exhaustive, the review provided here is an accurate representation of published studies on Right-to-Work and worker perceptions of their work environment. Much of literature on RTW focuses on how the law affects wage rates in states, and while research has been conducted on the laws effect on union density, worker productivity, business climate, and overall economic development, little or no research has been done on how RTW status influences worker perceptions. There has been no research that focused on the perception union workers have on their work environment and compensation and how those perceptions may differ from union workers in RTW states and those in NRTW states, which is how this study adds to the overall body of literature on Right-to-Work.

## **Construction Industry**

The heavy construction industry is unique in the scope of work performed and the environment for which employees make a living. Within the United States estimates have shown that the construction industry accounts for 4.8% of the overall gross domestic product. The construction industry is seen as one of the largest industries in the country, contributing an estimate of \$1.237 trillion to the economy and providing 7,072,000 jobs (Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2018). The Center to Protect Workers Rights (2002) estimated that 19% of construction workers were represented by a trade union and the Current Population Survey (CPS) estimated that 20% of workers were unionized in 2000 down from 36% in 1976. The CPS is a survey that is conducted by the United States Census Bureau, on behalf of the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), to approximately 60,000 U.S. households to gather data on unemployment and employment status. A subsequent study of the construction industry by Srour, Sailard, Haas, and Tucker (2004) stated estimates of 19% of workers in the construction trade were union members. Prior to 1970 the industrial construction industry was 41.9 % unionized (Maloney & McFillen, 1995) with a steady decline in the years following. Although union membership in the building and construction trades industry has seen a steady decline over the past number of decades, it remains a significant portion of overall industry workforce, particularly in larger institutional projects and the heavy industrial sector.

Construction workers do not often work steady shifts and are frequently unemployed due to the cycle of building construction. For many in the construction field finding steady work can be difficult. Being a member of a skilled construction trade union helps workers find jobs as they are dispatched from the union hiring list to signatory contractors performing projects within a certain geographic area. Unionized construction workers can be employed by a number of

different construction firms over a period of time depending upon which contractor secures projects being bid and the duration of the project being built (Erlich & Grabelsky, 2005). The construction industry is elastic with worker hours not being as consistent as other industries and positions. Mechanical construction firms are often the prime contractor on a project where they have a direct contract with the owner and manage the job themselves, while other times the owner will have a general contractor who is contracted to perform the work where they have the mechanical contractor as a sub-contractor (Stiglitz, 1983). In the heavy construction industry there are union general contractors that sub contract work to union contractors, but there are also instances where the general contractor is non-union while having union contractors as subs.

In 2015 there were 4,836 workplace deaths in the United States (OSHA, 2016). This statistic represents all types of jobs, employers, and industries. On average this reflects 93 job site deaths a week with 13 fatalities a day during 2015 (OSHA, 2016). The construction industry is a dynamic one that provides workers with a different set of work place issues than are found in a typical nine to five, 40 hour/week positions. Construction is one of the most hazardous industries in the United States in terms of worker fatalities and non-fatal work related injuries (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). In 2015 the construction industry had the highest number of worker fatalities since 2008, with 937 job site deaths. The 2015 occupational death rate was 4 % higher than the previous years as there were 899 reported fatalities in 2014 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Of the 937 job site fatalities in 2015, 364 of them were due to falls, 90 from workers being struck in the head by an object, 81 stemming from electrocution, and 67 from workers being stuck or trapped in structures or underneath machinery (Industrial Ladder Safety, 2017). Statistics related to the construction industry accident and fatality rates are important for proper context of the work environment of employees and union members in the building trades.

For workers in the mechanical construction industry, in 2015 there was an increase in job site fatalities among plumbers, pipefitters, and steamfitters with 46 reported deaths in 2015 (Jones, 2016). As result of the hazardous nature of the construction industry, workers in this field experience high percentage of early retirement due to illness and injury (Brenner & Ahern, 2000). The unionized mechanical construction workers may possess different perceptions regarding their wages, benefits, and working conditions because of the uniqueness of this particular industry and increased concern for safety.

The construction industry is a highly competitive one when considering both unionized firms and non-union companies that are actively bidding the same projects. The volatile nature of the bidding process lends itself to significant swings in employment for the unionized construction trade unions. Wage rates and benefits levels of union construction workers are higher than non-union workers in the same industry, which affects the ability of unionized construction firms in securing projects when competing against lower paying non-union firms. The significance of the wage and benefits differentials among union and non-union construction firms is important as it may have an influence on union member perceptions on their own wages and benefits. These are factors that influence the unionized mechanical construction industry that should be taken into account when studying union member perceptions.

### **Wagner Act**

The Wagner Act, also known as the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), was signed into law by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1935. The key provisions of the Act include providing workers the right to organize and form a union, to collectively bargain with employers through union representation, along with stipulating a number of unfair labor practices designed to create fair and equitable guidelines of behavior for both labor and management. The Act also

prohibits employers from discriminating against workers in regards to employment based on affiliations with unions or who have expressed positive views of organized labor (Hogler, 2007). The Act created what was referred to as a “union security agreement”. The union security agreement provision of the Act eliminated the ability of a worker to choose whether or not to join a union (Shannon, 2014). The Wagner Act was supported by organized labor and predominantly pro-union legislation.

The Wagner Act set forth the core labor relations process that unions and employers follow to this day. The labor relation process generally consists of the five following actions: (1) workers desire to have formal workplace representation, (2) union representatives begin an organizing campaign, (3) the National Labor Relations Board process for overseeing the election begins, (4) labor and management conduct collective bargaining to form a new contract, and (5) the approved and ratified contract is in place and administered (Snell, Morris, & Bohlander, 2016). In order for both employers and their unionized workforce to have in place a set of processes for how each party can conduct themselves in labor relation activities the Wagner Act was enacted to create these set of guidelines.

The National Labor Relations Board was created under the Wagner Act to oversee and monitor labor and management activities. The NLRB renders decisions on labor and management disputes that become precedents for other unions and employers to follow. Such decisions have resulted in provisions for unions to provide written notification to their members regarding compensation and contract information (Dessler, 2011). The Act includes five key unfair labor practices addressing employer activities. Examples of these employers activities include: (1) not interfering with or coercing employees in the exercising of their worker rights, (2) not interfering with any union organizing activities, (3) not discriminating against the hiring

or any aspect of employment or discouraging employees from joining a union, (4) not retaliating for the filing of a grievance or to testify under the act, and (5) not refusing to collectively bargain with union representatives (Bennett-Alexander & Hartman, 2001). Based upon the nature of the unfair labor practices being mostly focused on employer activities, the Wagner Act is widely seen as pro-union.

### **Taft-Hartley Act**

The Taft-Hartley Act was signed into law in 1947 as an amendment to the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA). The NLRA (Wagner Act) included many provisions that were pro-union resulting in dramatic growth in union membership and the shifting of workplace power away from employers to organized labor. The Taft-Hartley Act had a number of specific goals intended to address workplace labor and management relations. An initial purpose of the Act was to address existing labor law by making the collective bargaining process power among unions and employers to be more balanced. In addition, a number of union unfair labor practices are stipulated in Taft-Hartley in order for union activities to be better regulated, such as: not restraining or coercing workers in their rights in the selecting of union representation, not causing an employer to discriminate against a worker, not refusing to bargain with an employer, not engaging in secondary boycotts, not charging excessive membership fees or dues, and not causing an employer to pay for goods that are not being provided (Bennett-Alexander & Hartman, 2001). The intent of Taft-Hartley and the added unfair labor practices is to provide a more balanced relationship between unions and employers.

As a result of the Wagner Act, organized labor made significant gains in the workplace by increasing their union membership and negotiating many pro-worker policies within collective bargaining agreements. Employers became frustrated with the level of control unions



were having in the workplace and congress began to take notice. The more powerful unions became led to congress wanting to stipulate federal regulations. This resulted in the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act (Bennett-Alexander & Hartman, 2001). Passage of Taft-Hartley was controversial and was resisted heavily by organized labor and workers. The inclusion of more pro-business rules and regulations in Taft-Hartley were seen by unions as taking away of the many positive worker rights that took place after the passage of the Wagner Act.

Taft-Hartley prohibited “closed shop” employers and placed restrictions on “union shops” by creating “agency shops.” Agency shops do not require a worker to become a full union member but the worker must pay an “agency fee.” The agency fee that the worker pays is for the union representation they have during collective bargaining contract negotiations with the employer, but cannot be used for union political activities (Shannon, 2014). The law also focused on providing individual worker rights in regards to their respective labor organizations. The last critical element within the Taft-Hartley Act was to formally make collective bargaining agreements be a binding contract with all the stipulations found in legal contracts (Summers, 1958). Providing collective bargaining agreements with the same formal significance as written contracts increased worker leverage and influence over their hourly wage and benefits and lead to the need for employers to fully engage union demands.

The Taft-Hartley Act also includes the Right-to-Work provision (Shister, 1958) which will be detailed in this literature review. The Taft-Hartley Act provided individual states the authority to enact Right-to-Work laws that prohibit mandatory agency shops (Shannon, 2014). With this study focusing on union member perceptions of their benefits, it is important to note that the Taft-Hartley Act included provisions regarding employer contributions into union members health and welfare and pension fund programs. The act established the stipulation

upon employers who sign collective bargaining agreements (CBA) that included benefit contributions must be paid in accordance to the contract (Witte, 1947). With unionized employers contractually bound to provide the benefits established in the CBA the concern over companies dropping worker fringes is diminished.

### **Landrum-Griffin Act**

Until the mid-1900s any legal disputes pertaining to the internal operating affairs of unions were addressed through common law and the state court system without any involvement with federal law. The Labor-Management Reporting and Disclosure Act of 1959, better known as the Landrum-Griffin Act, was passed into law in order to provide oversight and regulate internal union affairs (Carrell & Heavrin, 2010). As the growth of the labor movement continued, the size of union membership and union organizations grew, without a consistent means to have internal union disputes addressed. The passage of the Landrum-Griffin Act included provisions for union member freedom of speech, mandatory secret-ballot election of union officers, and limits to how union funds could be used (Carrell & Heavrin, 2010).

As an amendment to the Wagner Act and Taft-Hartley Act, the Landrum-Griffin Act limits the power that unions have in regards to how internal union funds are managed, provides safeguards to union elections, established due process for member disciplinary action, and enabled union members to file lawsuits against the union to settle disputes (Carrell & Heavrin, 2010). With the passage of the Landrum-Griffin Act in 1959 labor union organizations now had federal regulations in place addressing internal union activities and how disputes are to be formally resolved.

## **Right-to-Work**

Within one year of the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, 12 states enacted Right-to-Work legislation. From 1951 to 1976, an additional eight states became RTW, from 1985 to 2013, four more states became RTW (Shannon, 2014). West Virginia, Kentucky, and Missouri passed RTW legislation in 2016 and 2017, bringing the total to 28 states having enacted the law since 1947 (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2017).

With Right-to-Work legislation leaning anti-union and pro-business, it is a factor in how unions operate and function as an organization. A state that is RTW creates an environment where unions need to put more time and resources into organizing efforts and the maintaining of union membership. Right-to-Work legislation is a political issue that requires government passage, thus, the collective public awareness and perspective of the electorate influences individual state's RTW status. Palomba and Palomba (1971) found the level of unionization within a state had a significant impact on the passage of Right-to-Work legislation. The relationship between level of unionization and a state's RTW status, as indicated in 1971, remains current with NRTW states having 17.5% unionization and RTW states with 7.3% workers in a union in 2012 (Gould & Kimball, 2015). The greater level of union density in the workplace of a state the more likely RTW legislation would not be enacted.

The level of anti-union attitude that employers have towards unions can be a critical determinant to the amount of union penetration into a state (Hogler, Shulman, & Weiler, 2004). If employer anti-union views are strong and consistent enough within a RTW state they will have an effect on the organization's work environment and culture. Unions in NRTW states are better able to maintain membership levels because of less stringent membership options for workers. Workers in NRTW states who seek employment with a company that is unionized must join the

union as a condition of employment, making membership in the union mandatory, or pay “fair share”. Proponents of RTW legislation see these laws as resulting in increased economic development and attracting employer investment within their state. An indication of how RTW status can enhance economic development was found in a study finding that RTW legislation had a direct impact on increasing manufacturing 2.12% in the private sector (Kalenkoski & Lacombe, 2006). Furthermore, Kalenkoski and Lacombe concluded that manufacturers having less likelihood of a unionized plant made locating operations in a RTW state more desirable for business owners. RTW states having a low hourly wage rate and less union density was a factor for certain industries, particularly manufacturing, in locating operations in those states over states that are NRTW.

States that are RTW have an average wage reduction of 6 to 8 % in overall work wage levels over NRTW states, when adjusted for cost of living, that reduction is 4% (Mishel, 2001). A study conducted by the Economic Policy Institute (Gould & Shierholz, 2011) confirmed the wage reduction estimates found by Mishel (2001). States that have RTW legislation in place have an average wage that is 3.2% lower than states without the law, which equates to approximately \$1,500 annually (Gould & Shierholz, 2011). A downward trend in worker wages in RTW states may result in negative perceptions among the employees towards their compensation. Reed’s (2003) study of wages and Right-to-Work status went further than Mishel to include a state’s economic condition. Reed concluded that states with a lower per capita income were more likely to have RTW enacted and in place. This viewpoint of the employer and overall pro-business environment will not go unnoticed by workers. This can have an impact on union worker perceptions towards their employer and work environment.

In addition, employer provided health insurance coverage was 2.6% lower in RTW states (Gould & Kimball, 2015). Although slightly, this study indicated that employers in RTW states were less likely to provide their employees with healthcare benefits compared to companies located in NRTW states. With the passage of the Affordable Care Act in 2009 the statistics regarding percentage of employer provided health insurance coverage will increase. When it comes to employer provided pension benefits, RTW states have 4.8% fewer workers that receive this benefit as compared to NRTW states (Gould & Kimball, 2015).

A state's level of worker unionization is a factor in their Right-to-Work status. The greater amount of unionization and union density found in a state the more likely the state will be NRTW (Palomba & Palomba, 1971). In this study the researchers did not take into account other critical factors influencing unionization levels such as a state's economy or level of manufacturing. A subsequent study by Moore (1974) concluded that a state's overall industry make-up, whether manufacturing or agricultural, level of urbanization, and general population density throughout the state, all had a direct influence on a state's Right-to-Work status. The lower percentage of workers in a state that are represented by a union the less political strength held to either repeal RTW legislation or maintain NRTW status from being enacted by elected government officials.

Gould and Shierholz (2011) conducted a household survey comparing wages between RTW and NRTW states controlling for cost of living differences and 42 different factors related to demographics, economics, region, and public policy. Their conclusion was that RTW states, on average, have a 3.2% lower wage rate than NRTW states. Similar results regarding fringe benefit levels were found in the research data. Reed (2003) found different conclusions as his study examined income levels controlling for per capita income in 1945 (prior to RTW

enactment) he emphasized the issue of how RTW states tend to be lower economically sound states and how that effects economic development, wage levels, and employment. Reed further concluded that RTW laws resulted in 6.7% higher wages than NRTW states. With union workers' perception towards their wages, benefits, and working conditions being studied, this research will seek to determine the differences of these perceptions from those who work in a RTW state and those who do not.

It is important to understand the wage, benefit, and economic differences between states with RTW and those without the law as it will influence union member perceptions of the workplace and their work environment. Workers in NRTW states are two and a half times more likely to be in a union than those who are employed in a RTW state (Gould & Kimball, 2015). RTW laws are pro-business, or anti-union, which is reflected in data that show combined private and public sector union density is 8.8% lower in RTW states as compared to NRTW. The work environment in a RTW state can have a negative influence on the union workers attitudes towards their employers and work environment.

The Right-to-Work status of a state is a result of many factors, such as union density, employer influence, economic conditions, and governmental politics. Studies conducted by Warren and Strauss (1979) and by Hirsch (1980) similarly concluded that RTW has a negative effect on union density in a state with the legislation by three to five percent. The standard for determining union density is the percentage of workers in an industry that are represented by a union or covered by a collective bargaining agreement (Lewis, 1963). Collective bargaining agreements are contracts negotiated between employers and unions that are to determine wages, benefits, and working conditions (Schiller & Gebhardt, 2016). It must be noted that a number of factors impact the level of union density, such as the education level of the workforce in a given

industry and the geographical concentration that an industry has in a region (Rosen, 1969). The negative impact RTW has on union density and decline of membership is evident in the state of Idaho and Indiana. Idaho became RTW in 1985 and the percentage of workers in that state being represented by a union declined from 9% in 1984 to 4.7% in 2013. Similarly, in 2011 the state of Indiana had 11.2% of their workers being in a union which dropped to 9.3% in 2013 (Shannon, 2014). There may be other factors within these states that influenced union density and decline, but the enactment of Right-to-Work legislation is widely seen as a critical factor.

It is the state-wide work environment that Right-to-Work status creates that will be a significant part of this study. Ellwood and Fine (1987) studied the effects of union organizing in all 50 states 20 years after the passage of the Right-to-Work law. They concluded in the five years following RTW passage, union organizing success rates dropped 46%. Although the level decline of organizing success did not remain as dramatic over time, it did result in sustained organizing loss. Early studies on the impact of Right-to-Work laws focused on specific states with the United States. A study conducted by Meyers (1955) concluded that RTW legislation had little or no impact on the strengths of unions within the state of Texas. Similarly, Kuhlman (1955) concluded that there was limited change in the hiring practices of organizations within the state of Virginia. A study conducted in the state of Indiana by Novit (1969) stated that the law itself was relatively ineffective since already formed unions were found to conduct themselves around the law. With these early studies it may have been too soon to find credible evidence within each state as to the impact of their Right-to-Work status.

Studies have shown that Right-to-Work legislation has a negative effect on a union's ability to organize and grow their membership. There are many factors that go into a worker's decision to join a union. Garofalo and Malhotra (1992) concluded that Right-to-Work status of a

state has an influence in the decision making of employees. They identified two specific RTW factors that have an influence, one being wage and the other workplace productivity. They found that RTW laws did in fact impact decisions based on wages, while the overall effect on employee productivity was limited and not as influential. Gallaway (1966) suggests that unions in RTW states will be more forceful in how they represent their members so to help attract more union members by reflecting a greater effort in trying to obtain higher wages. This affirms other studies indicating that Right-to-Work laws force unions to work harder to organize new members and represent them in obtaining better wages, benefits, and working conditions.

Another factor compounding the issue of union's ability to organize in RTW states involve free riders. A free rider is a worker covered by a collective bargaining agreement who is not a member of the union. Moore (1998) concluded that in Right-to-Work states there are 6% to 10% more free riders than there are in NRTW. In 2012, the states of Indiana and Michigan became Right-to-Work as did Wisconsin in 2015. Those three states each saw an increase in percentage of workers who were free riders, with Indiana having the highest of 11%, Michigan with 7%, and Wisconsin with 6.5% (Zullo, 2015). Contributing to this percentage difference is the general environment of anti-union sentiment and increased difficulty for unions to organize workers in NRTW states. This leads to lower motivation for some workers to join a union. A study conducted in the state of North Carolina concluded that RTW laws have a negative and downward force on worker wages (Malizia, 1976). Malizia's conclusion stems from RTW states leading to lower union density which will result in lower average wages because of less collective bargaining and formal representation of workers.

There are many factors that go into any one particular state's economic development and employment figures. It is difficult to isolate any one specific element that affects employment



rates, union density, economic growth, or work perceptions of their work environment. Holmes (1998) concluded that Right-to-Work legislation has an impact on economic development and employment, particularly within the manufacturing industry. Holmes indicated that manufacturing employment increased approximately 30% in RTW states compared to bordering NRTW states. Companies looking to invest and build manufacturing plants had a tendency to select RTW states as a location over NRTW states in the same region. It must be noted that Holmes indicated that factors related to infrastructure and transportation had a significant effect on his data and a state's level of economic development.

The Economic Policy Institute (2015) conducted a study that provided insight into key worker characteristics of those who are from Right-to-Work states and those who are from Non-Right-to-Work states, those characteristics include that 57.7% of employees in NRTW states were hourly with 55.9% in RTW states. In regards to employment status, 79.4% of workers in NRTW states were categorized as full-time with 83% of workers being full-time in RTW. The study further indicated that 17.5% of workers in NRTW states were in a union with RTW workers being 7.3% unionized. As it related to compensation, the average hourly wage of a worker in NRTW states is \$23.93 and \$20.66 for workers in RTW states (Gould & Kimball, 2015). Based upon these studies the work environment in a RTW state has a higher percentage of full-time workers, lower percentage of workers being a member of union, and workers make an average of \$3 less an hour than those in a NRTW state.

### **Employee Perceptions**

A perception is an individual's psychological construct regarding an issue that is derived from a number of other constructs, such as one's historical character, sense of self, attitudes, emotions, and experiences (Calhoun, Gerteis, Moody, Pfaff, & Virk, 2007). Perceptions

influence how people understand what is around them. From a psychological viewpoint an individual's perception has a significant influence on how they view and accept their surroundings. In order for individuals to make sense of reality and the world around them people often simplify their perceptions. Perceptions may be formed without an individual having all the information available to them about any given topic or issue, which can result in personal perceptual biases (Calhoun, Gerteis, Moody, Pfaff, & Virk, 2007). As this study seeks to better understand union worker perceptions regarding their wages, benefits, working conditions, and Right-to-Work legislation, it is important to emphasize the concept of perceptions and how they are formed by an individual. The participants in this study are all union members within the mechanical construction trade. Although the union workers in this research have similar backgrounds related to working in the same industry, it is expected that each holds different perceptions of their wages, benefits, working conditions, and Right-to-Work status because of non-work related life experiences.

Perception-based views (PBV) (Vithessonthi, 2005) attempt to explain why individuals, in the same situation and looking at the same issue, can have differing perceptions. The PBV approach uses an individual worker's perception to better understand the employee's decision-making. It also attempts to answer why individuals can have varying perceptions about a situation. PBV acknowledges that an individual's psychological and emotional factors have an influence on their behaviors resulting in varying perceptions towards similar situations and work environment matters (Vithessonthi, 2005). The relevance of the PBV approach to this research is to better understand how union construction workers, who are employed in the same industry and making a similar amount of wages and benefits, can have varying perceptions of their wages, benefits, and working conditions. Individuals with very similar backgrounds, life experiences,

and work related history will often have different perceptions regarding a topic, issue, or event that they are both experiencing. PBV helps to provide insight as to how a person's emotional background can influence their perceptions of their surroundings. Although there is not a great deal of literature or utilization of PBV it provides good insight for a study of employee behavior and decision making.

There are a number of factors that influence an employee's perception of their compensation and work environment. Some of these factors include their individual characteristics, life experience, work history, job security, and safety concerns, along with their employer's internal policies and practices, and family union history. A critical factor regarding employee perceptions for this study will be on how being in a union influences the worker's perceptions on both compensation and the work environment (Tetrick, 1993). Literature on union worker perceptions often focus on the influence that being in a union has on job satisfaction. One theory suggests that union workers indicate and promote dissatisfaction regarding their working conditions in order to leverage for higher wages and benefits (Freeman & Medhoff, 1984). There may be truth to the union worker's concerns, but when dissatisfaction towards wages, benefits, and workplace matters are used as an intentional tactic against an employer, it must be factored into the perception equation. With this study involving union worker perceptions it is important to acknowledge that union representatives can influence the members. Another theory states that the greater the tenure a union worker has with their employer, the more dissatisfied with their job as compared to union members with less experience (Gius, 2013). The longer a worker holds a position with their employer the greater likelihood of them holding negative perceptions towards their work environment. Although the tenure of the study participants was not a focus point for this research, the tendency of union workers remaining in

the building trades industry for their entire career may result in more negative perceptions being formed.

The influence that union leaders have with their membership along with the length of time a worker has been a member of the union impacts individual perceptions regarding their work environment (Freeman & Medoff, 1984). Union representatives provide information to their membership. The information that is disseminated to the union workers influences their perceptions on the issues being presented to them. Unions can significantly increase their member's knowledge regarding their hourly wage and fringe benefits through the use of newsletters, workshops, and informational training sessions (Freeman & Medoff, 1984). There is no literature indicating a relationship between union influence and the Right-to-Work status of a state, but union leadership does influence member's perceptions. Having formal union representation, which governs the union operation and membership, must be factored into the perceptions among the unionized workers. Individual worker perceptions are formed from their experiences and what occurs among union members and the information provided by their elected officials, Business Managers, all impact worker perceptions.

### **Wage Perceptions**

An individual employee's wage is meaningful to them, not only as a way to make a living, but because it is symbolic to whom they are as a person (Day, 2012). What comes from the wage paid to someone for the work they perform is the symbolic meaning in the context for what that compensation level means in society and among the individuals around them. How individuals interact with one another is influenced by how their wage or salary is seen from a social status perspective (Waytz, 2009). For many people the amount a person makes is not particularly important, but how society views and categorizes individuals is influenced by their

hourly wage or annual salary. Although an employer will set a specific job description or individual employee's wage level based up the tasks performed, work experience, or degree of responsibility the position holds, it is important to acknowledge an individual worker's perception regarding how their compensation is influenced by outside social and status factors. Employers need to set wage and salary structure based upon what is appropriate for the job requirements, for any given position along with the education and work experience a person brings to the company, but consider the value that society places on compensation.

Equity Theory states that the degree to which an employee perceives fairness of the amount of work effort they put forward is reciprocated by their employer in the amount of compensation they provide. Equity Theory suggests that an employee's motivation to perform is influenced by the amount of reward they receive from their employer in the form of compensation (Leventhal, 1976). When a worker senses their level of compensation is fair, in relationship to their job tasks and what they do for their employer, it will influence their overall perception of their wage in a positive manner.

Employees expect to have the experiences and skill sets they bring to their position to be directly linked to what they are paid (Van Rens, 2016). When an individual perceives the input they provide through their performance to be equal to what they are being compensation for by their employer, they will form a sense of fair treatment. If there is an inequity between what an employee sees in their performance and the level of compensation provided for their work, tension is created. If that tension is significant, or continues for an extended period of time, it can result in an employee quitting their job or increased absenteeism (Della Torre, Pelagatti. & Solari, 2014). For many workers their degree of employee satisfaction results from being treated fairly. From the employer perspective it is important to understand that their worker's

behavior is influenced by the level of wages they provide for the work they perform.

Conceptually a worker that receives a wage increase should result in increased productivity enhancing the employer's profit-maximization (Charness & Kuhn, 2007). As hourly wage increases and worker behavior changes so will the employee's perception of fair treatment stemming of their compensation.

The level of wage compensation provided for the work being performed is a factor in how the individual perceives whether or not they are being treated fairly. Although Equity Theory is not the theoretical approach for this study, it is important to note the effect of being compensated fairly has on employee perceptions. One way for employees to perceive whether or not they are being paid fairly is through market pricing. Market pricing involves determining employee pay values by comparing them to other organizations (Grigson, Delaney, & Jones, 2004). An employee perception of their wage is influenced by how their wage compares to other workers within different organizations. If a worker is being paid higher than someone in another company their perception of their pay level is likely to be more positive than if they were being compensated less. What an individual receives in their wage does not solely determine how they perceive that form of their compensation. The degree to which they value their wage and form their perception is based upon how that wage level compares to what others receive (Chou, 2010). Worker perceptions are not based upon just one aspect of their work environment but a number of influences found in the workplace but their level of compensation is a critical factor.

Worker perception regarding their wage level is not only important for workers themselves, but also for the employer. How an individual perceives their wage affects their job performance. The relationship between an employee's pay level and their job task responsibilities has a clear influence on their perception. A study conducted by Szytko and

Rasch (2012) concluded that 29% of employees were able to link their level of pay and their work performance and 18% of employees indicated a desire to leave their positions because of how their wage was connected to their performance. When there is no direct relationship between an employee's job performance and wage levels, 36% of workers stated they would seriously consider leaving that employer (Szytko & Rasch, 2012). This study indicates the importance of having a proper level of wages to be relative to job tasks performed.

Shaw and Gupta (2007) focused on the way wage and pay distribution are communicated to employees has an impact on worker perceptions. Their study concluded that regardless of pay increases, or focus on performance, if proper pay system communication is not conducted it will result in a more negative employee perception among different pay groups within an organization. If pay communication is poor, employees are less likely to perform at their highest level of productivity or seek advancement possibilities (Shaw & Gupta, 2007). How wage information is communicated throughout an organization has an impact on how an employee will perceive their individual level of compensation. There is no research indicating a difference in how wage and benefit information is communicated to employees based upon a state's RTW status, but it is important to note that how employers communicate with workers can influence their perceptions.

Wages are another important factor among union members in how they perceive their elected union representatives fulfilling their responsibilities. Union representatives are in a position to provide information to their members regarding wage rates and how those rates compare to other unions along with non-union employees. Average union wages remain higher than non-union workers, but that gap has decreased over time (Fiorito, 2002). There is an economic advantage in wages that remain when being a union member, although it has

diminished over time. With the wage difference, expectation would be that union workers would have greater job satisfaction than non-union employees, but evidence does not indicate so (Kaufmann, 2004). Non-union workers are not part of this research, but Kaufmann's study provides data on the degree to which union workers have job satisfaction. Kaufmann found that own-wage elasticity among organized labor affected union member behavior and satisfaction among their own level of compensation. Own-wage elasticity is the responsiveness that workers have to a change in their wage. Allen (1994) found that the average wage differential between a union worker and those not represented by a union reflected a 29% higher wage for unionized employees, which was significantly lower than the 50% differential in 1970.

Median weekly earnings for nonunion workers in 2016 were \$802 with union workers making \$1,004 (BLS, 2017). Although union worker wages are higher than non-union employees, union workers remain dissatisfied with their level of pay. A British survey conducted on union member attitudes (Bryson & McKay, 1997) showed that union recognition has a political influence on how members expressed their opinions on wage levels. The study indicated that union members were not likely to indicate that their hourly wage was low because of political purposes. Workers expressed concern over indicating dissatisfaction about their hourly wage and the potential negative reaction by their union representatives. Although this study took place outside of the United States there is no reason to believe the political concern indicated by the union members about their wage would not be the same in the U.S. Furthermore, individual union member perceptions of their wages can vary dramatically from one worker to another. This creates a need for the union leadership to gain a collective perception and desire among the membership (Nealey, 1963). The importance of collective union representation involves the politics within the union and how the leadership presents



matters related to their members' wages. How the union leadership frames and presents issues and their viewpoint on wages will influence the individual worker.

### **Benefit Perceptions**

For the purpose of this literature review worker benefits is the element of employee compensation that are non-wage benefits such as life insurance, health insurance, pension, vacation, and holidays (U.S. Department of Labor, 2016). Union workers often refer to their compensation as “total package”, which consists of both an hourly wage and benefits. Non-wage benefits have become an increasingly significant portion of their overall compensation. It is important to include the perceptions of union workers towards their benefits because of the high proportion of compensation cost and worth that benefits provide.

In 1932, President Roosevelt considered providing universal healthcare to United States citizens by including healthcare in his Social Security plan, but decided against it because of pressure from the American Medical Association. In an effort to address concern over inflation, during World War II, the Stabilization Act was passed into law in 1942. The act restricted an employer's ability to provide workers a pay raise, which resulted in employers seeking other ways to compensate their workforce. As a result, employers began to include healthcare benefits in how they compensated their employees because the benefit was not considered income and payroll taxes did not have to be paid on them (Rook, 2015). This was the beginning of benefits being included in employee compensation and employer sponsored healthcare coverage. Benefits were once accepted as a minor addition to an employee's wage or salary as an incentive to attract qualified employees, but it has evolved into an expected part of compensation (Martocchio, 2015). Benefits have become a critical factor in total compensation among union workers because it has evolved as expectation for being a union member and a reflection of

having formal representation. To highlight the direct link between unionization and workers having healthcare benefits, the decline in union membership from 1983 to 1997 resulted in a 25% decline in healthcare coverage during that same time period (Buchmueller, Thomas, DiNardo, & Valletta. 2002). This is relevant to Right-to-Work status as studies have shown that RTW states have lower union membership and union density and therefore lower percentage of workers having healthcare benefits.

The majority of employees in the United States receive benefits through being in the workforce. A Health Reform Monitoring Survey, conducted in 2013 by the Urban Institute, indicated that 82% of full-time workers, whose employer had 1,000 employees or more, received healthcare coverage from the employer, while 33% of workers in companies with ten or fewer workers obtained their coverage through their jobs (Blavin, Shartzter, Long, & Holahan, 2014). It is estimated that 155 million individuals receive their healthcare benefits through employer-sponsored compensation programs (Mangan, 2016). Full-time status of employment is often the criteria for which both health insurance and retirement benefits are provided by an employer. Individuals can obtain healthcare coverage and provide their own retirement benefits, but the vast majority of people today receive both of these benefits through employment as provided by their employer. A study by Freeman (1981) concluded that employers with at least 50% of their workers represented by a union paid 25% to 35% more into non-mandatory benefits compared to solely non-union workplaces.

A factor to consider when researching employee perceptions of their benefits is that individual workers tend not to estimate the true expense of their benefits properly and have limited knowledge of those costs (Gerhart & Milkovich, 1992). Knowing the actual premium cost that an employer pays for employee healthcare coverage along with the expense of other

fringe benefits, such as pension and 401-K contributions, would provide workers with a full understanding of the expense involved with the benefit aspect of their compensation. Studies have indicated that workers view their benefits more than just added employer expenses, or if cash was added to their wage, instead of going towards their benefits (Weathington & Tetrick, 2000) and (Williams, Malos, & Palmer, 2002). Having healthcare coverage and pension benefits provided by an employer has a meaning for a worker that is different from an hourly wage. When considering the distinction between wage and benefits within the total package, the impact of benefits on worker attitudes and perceptions varies from hourly wage (Dreher, Ash, & Bretz, 1988). Furthermore, an individual's degree of job satisfaction has a direct link to how they perceive their benefits (Sinclair, Hannigan, & Tetrick, 1995). Healthcare coverage and retirement benefits fulfill critical needs of an employee that is beyond what their wage and salary provide. The importance of healthcare insurance and retirement security being satisfied by the employer influences a worker's perception of their compensation and workplace beyond what the wage provides.

When it comes to employee benefits, unions are more associated with a higher level of benefits than workers who are not represented by a union (Montgomery & Shaw, 1997). Fosu (1993) found that there is a direct relationship between union representation and whether or not a worker has healthcare coverage. Fosu concluded that unions have a greater influence on whether or not a worker has a retirement benefit. There are a number of factors that formulate a worker's perception of their benefits making it difficult to identify each one or taking all of them into account. Some factors include the employee's current life style, demographic, and individual need. Benefits vary in utility to individual workers as any one particular benefit may be more important to one employee as compared to another (Lambert, 2000). Although there may be

varying contribution levels, the union members participating in this study have similar healthcare and pension benefits.

Hart and Carraher (1995) conducted a study focused on whether or not workers viewed their benefits as a right that their employer was obligated to provide. Although the majority of benefits are a voluntary benefit for employers to provide their employees, over time many workers have expressed benefits as an expectation for employment and a natural part of their overall compensation. Studies have suggested an employer's perception of the benefits they provide their workers may be different than how their employees perceive them. Studies conducted by Miceli and Lane (1991) and Williams (1993) indicated that individual employee's own level of satisfaction and perceptions of the benefits within their compensation package is determined partially between the difference of their perception of the amount of benefits they receive and the level of benefits that they feel they deserve. The further the gap between worker perceptions of their benefits and that of the level of benefits they think they should be provided, the more negative their perceptions will be.

Weathington and Tetrick (2000) concluded that employer-provided benefits have an effect on employee perceptions, but there is no evidence that the overall value of the benefit has a direct relation to worker perceptions. Many workers do not know the full cost and financial burden that providing healthcare coverage and retirement benefits is because they do not often see the actual cost. Workers do not have full knowledge of the true cost of their benefits as compared to their hourly wage of annual salary. If workers were provided information regarding the true expense of their fringe benefits it would likely have an effect on their perceptions of their compensation and toward the employer.

Much of the research into employee benefits has focused on the impact this element of compensation affects employee job satisfaction (Balkin & Griffith, 1993). Heneman and Schwab (1979) studied benefits linked to job satisfaction which did not factor in employee perceptions of their benefits or how these perceptions influenced overall job satisfaction. This would have resulted in a true and full depiction of job satisfaction levels. The focus of these two studies are on pay levels and job satisfaction. Furthermore, when employee benefits have been studied there has been a tendency to view them as one entity and not breaking them into healthcare coverage or retirement benefits (Hart & Carraher, 1995). Hart and Carraher concluded that when it comes to benefits, employees typically undervalue and underestimate the real cost of the benefits being provided to them by their employer.

Health care premiums continue to rise at a pace difficult for the average individual to afford. As the cost of healthcare coverage rises and employees understand the importance of having medical insurance, this influences how workers perceive this benefit. With so much public attention to the escalating cost of healthcare it has become much more a part of the average worker's awareness (Abraham, Feldman, & Carlin, 2004). Individual benefits within the total package may mean more to one worker than another. Workers who may be starting a family may hold more importance to healthcare benefits as compared to employees who are middle aged and more mindful to their retirement benefits. With varying importance of certain benefits from one worker to another, specific perceptions are difficult to determine without breaking down each benefit item. Despite benefits being a critical part of union worker compensation there has been limited study conducted on how these benefits affect overall satisfaction or their influence on general workplace perceptions.

The cost of providing workers their benefits continues to increase at a much greater rate than wages (Rosenbaum, Hirsch, & Hirsch, 2015). In order for employers to continue to provide benefits to their employees at increasing expense, it must be offset by providing lower wage, or at least much lower wage increases. In an effort to address increased benefit expenses employers have begun to lower the level or quality of benefits coverage (Balkin & Griffith, 1993). As benefits costs continue to increase it will become increasingly common for employees to become more responsible for contributing to their plans. These trend changes will have an influence on worker perceptions.

Benefits enable workers to meet critical life needs such as medical coverage and supplemental retirement funds. As workers get closer to retirement age, the cost of maintaining a lifestyle similar to what they have while in the workforce, the need for retirement benefits becomes critical (Semuels, 2018). The importance of employer provided retirement benefits is increasingly important as many individuals are concerned that Social Security will not be sufficient enough for someone to sustain retirement once they cease to work (Collins, 2018). In comparison to non-union workforces, unionized employees were more likely to have a pension program that is a defined-benefit and not defined-contribution (Freeman & Medoff, 1984), resulting in a more guaranteed retirement benefit based upon years of service. Defined benefit pension programs provide retirement benefits based upon years of service and a guaranteed level of benefit throughout the participant's retirement. Defined contribution pension programs tend to include an hourly or monthly retirement contribution that remains with the participant that does not guarantee a level of retirement, but fluctuates based upon investment market conditions.

When considering union worker perceptions of benefits and how both medical coverage and retirement benefits are needed to minimize any risk of not having them, this concern

becomes a factor and major influence on their perceptions. The cost and ability to obtain healthcare and retirement outside of employer provided compensation impacts how workers perceive their jobs and employers. There has been limited research on the relationship between Right-to-Work status and healthcare or worker retirement benefits beyond indications that NRTW states tend to have higher benefit levels. Benefit levels has an influence on worker perceptions towards their employer and work environment, therefore, it is important to acknowledge how RTW legislation can have a negative effect of benefit levels.

### **Working Conditions Perceptions**

There are many factors that go into an employee's overall work environment and experience although it is important to first acknowledge a fundamental need of individuals to be in safe work environment, to belong, and self-actualize (Maslow, 1943). An employee's work environment consists of two distinct elements, the first being physical factors and the second related to behavior and interpersonal dynamics (Massoudi, Salah, & Hamdi, 2017). The physical factors consist of the actual surroundings that connect the employee with their job and ability to perform, while behavioral elements involve how well the organization's employees interact and work among one another (Stallworth & Kleiner, 1996). The social and behavioral components of working conditions have been found to have a significant influence over how motivated and satisfied employees are within their work environment (Franco, Bennett, Kanfer, & Stubblebine, 2000). This study concluded that internal factors related to skills, abilities, and resources have a direct impact on work motivation and performance within their employment setting.

Many studies on the work environment and working conditions focus on either the physical aspect of the workplace or the interpersonal elements related to behavior and relationships. Although it is difficult to determine and study each of factor that goes into an

employee's work environment, both the physical and behavioral aspects have a direct influence on a worker's performance within the workplace (Strong, Jeannerert, McPhail, & Bleckley, 1999). To be safe at the workplace and feel a part of those around them is an essential element of being an employee and the beginning basis of work environment and perceptions thereof. Perceptions of working conditions are often based on personal experiences and the individual's cultural background (Atambo, Enock, & Nyamwamu, 2013). It is difficult to account for all life experiences that employees bring to their job and their work environment, but many studies have focused on certain criteria in order to understand what influences individual perceptions. Studies on employee perceptions of their working conditions often focus on an individual factor when a number of workplace issues come together to form working conditions (Freeman, 1978). How an employee performs their job and at their place of work is influenced by many factors; such as relationships with co-workers, ability to control their environment, and physical elements of their surrounding (Chandrasekar, 2011). Individual workplace indicators can provide valuable insight to what influences worker perceptions of their work environment, but when more elements of the workplace are included in a study, a greater understanding of the bigger picture is formed.

Much research on work environment focuses on conditions related to worker job satisfaction levels (Bryson & Freeman, 2012). Although job satisfaction is an important factor affecting individual perception, it alone is not enough to get the true perception that workers have on their work environment. Scott (2000) emphasized the significance that overall working conditions have on the degree to which a worker is satisfied with their position. Job satisfaction is a significant component in determining worker perceptions of their work environment and including this factor is essential, but additional data must be obtained, such as job position, employment tenure, management relationship, and employer practices. When it comes to



working conditions related to supervision, job content, and ability to make decisions, Meng (1990) found that union workers do not perceive their jobs as positive compared to non-union employees. Furthermore, Srivastava (2008) found that more employees perceive their physical work environment as inadequate and that greater likelihood of these perceptions results in an increased level of negative job satisfaction.

How an employee perceives their work environment can be influenced by how their immediate supervisor manages them, provides feedback on their performance, and the level of autonomy the individual has within their position (Chandrasekhar, 2011). Chandrasekhar emphasized the importance that both positive and negative feedback have on employee performance and the individual worker's ability to perform their job tasks. It was concluded that employee supervision must be mindful of and take into account a wide range of workplace factors when providing performance feedback. The level of autonomy a worker has has an effect on job satisfaction. Job autonomy is the degree to which an employee can control their own work behavior, work environment, and decision making. The more control a worker has towards their job tasks, absent direct supervision oversight, the greater their autonomy. The greater level of autonomy that someone has is associated with higher job and workplace satisfaction (Shaharruddin & Ahmad, 2015).

When it comes to working for an employer and among a group of employees, trust matters to an individual. How an employee is treated in the workplace has an impact on their level of job satisfaction and job commitment. When a worker is not being treated fairly by their employer or supervision it can result in job satisfaction decreasing and overall commitment to the organization (Konovsky, 2000). Research has been conducted on what factors of the work environment can lead to a sense of unfair treatment among the workers, while other studies have

concluded that proper organizational procedures and practices lead to increased job satisfaction and more productive work performance (Tyler & Blader, 2003). Tyler and Lind (1992) found that employees have a concern over their organization's relationship because of the leaders making decision about their workplace. The greater level of trust among employees, toward their employer, the higher degree of satisfaction that will be held regards to decision-making and the work environment.

Individuals care about their position within an organization and how they are treated by management during decision making. This has a direct influence on whether or not they feel they are valued and being treated fairly. Tyler and Lind (1992) concluded that when company leaders treat employees fairly and with respect it results in a sense of good standing among the employees. This sense of fair treatment creates a work environment where workers are more likely to follow rules and procedures that are put into place by their employer. Although additional research is needed, psychological contract theory has evolved in trying to determine work environment influences that affect employee experiences related to fulfilling their job requirements (Rousseau, 2005). This theory is attempting to identify the workplace factors that influence individual's psychological approach to their employer. Flood, Turner, Ramamoorthy, and Pearson (2001) contributed to the study of contract theory by concluding that perceived unfair treatment among workers will negatively affect the individual's psychological approach to the relationship with their employer.

Union members tend to have long tenure and subsequent years of experience in their workplace, which has been linked to a lower level of job satisfaction (Borjas, 1979). The tenure a worker has on the job and being a member of the union has an influence on worker's perceptions of their workplace, employers, and total package compensation. With unionized

workers having formal representation to get their concerns about working conditions and to help ensure fair work rules, one may assume the members would have higher satisfaction levels for their working conditions, but evidence does not reflect it (Pfeffer & David-Blake, 1990). In this same study the efforts of union members to actively work to improve their working conditions should have a positive effect on their perceptions. Earlier studies conducted by Borjas (1979) and Kochan & Helfman (1981) did not find a direct relationship between workers being a union member because they did not factor in the poor working conditions that resulted in the workers voting to have formal union representation. The significance with workers who have formal union representation and long tenure in their industry is that their level of job satisfaction can be influenced by both.

Workers choosing to be a member of a union or accepting a position that is represented by a union is often because of the individual's view of the work environment and working conditions within the organization. There is a relationship between working conditions and workers desire to join a union, particularly when there is a perception of frustration and alienation among the workers (Klandermans, 1986). Schwochau (1987) showed evidence that union workers view job outcomes differently than non-union employees, which can influence overall job satisfaction. Schwochau further indicated that the high focus unions put on wage and benefits may have an influence on the lower concern over job outcomes and other work environment matters. Freeman and Medoff (1984) suggest that union workers may be less satisfied with their jobs than non-union employees because their working conditions may be more difficult. Certain industries may require specific skill sets and abilities that result in unionized workers performing them because of the difficulty of the task and work environment. Highly trained and experienced union workers, and their employers, tend to be better qualified

and prepared to accomplish difficult and tedious job tasks, influencing employee satisfaction levels. In order to obtain a more complete picture of union worker perceptions a number of factors will be considered beyond job satisfaction levels. There is no literature indicating a difference in the work environment within a Right-to-Work state compared to a Non-Right-to-Work state and gaining knowledge of this subject matter will provide a better understanding of the study participants' perceptions of their work environment.

### **Union Influence**

Unions are formed for a number of reasons, such as providing workers with formal representation for workplace disputes, seeking higher wages, better benefits, and improving working conditions. For many, being a member of a union means wage increases, improved working conditions, protection in the workplace, and better treatment from management (Rees, 1962). In order to gain membership support for collective bargaining purposes and leverage during contract negotiations with employers, union representatives create heightened interest on wages, benefits, and working conditions. This study focuses on union workers, not the non-union sector; therefore, the influence that union representatives have on their members concerning compensation matters is a factor in how perceptions are formed. Tetrick (1993) concluded that the core relationship between a union member and their union is founded on a different economic exchange than what is between a non-union worker and their employer. A key difference resides in a union worker paying a percentage of their hourly wage, in dues to the union to maintain membership, and they give up individual representation, while a non-union employee is paid solely by the employer. The effect of paying dues, to maintain union membership, results in the worker having a dual workplace relationship - one with their union, and the other with the employer who pays them and for whom they perform work.

When it comes to workplace perceptions, research shows that unions have a significant influence on their members and how they form attitudes towards their employer, wages, benefits, and work environment. Unions can influence worker perceptions because they provide their members additional information regarding the workplace and industry standards that result in more awareness on a wide range of issues beyond that of non-union employees (Bryson & Freeman, 2012). Union-provided information regarding workplace matters, industry standards, safety, government politics, employer issues, and industry average compensation data will help form union member perceptions. Studies have shown that union representatives help to create an environment of dissatisfaction among their members in order to gain greater worker support for bargaining purposes with the employer (Bryson & Freeman, 2012). Additional research indicates a greater cause-and-effect relationship between union membership and worker dissatisfaction (Bryson, Cappellari, & Lucifora, 2010). As a number of workplace factors influence worker perceptions, studies have clearly indicated that union representation has a direct effect on their member's perceptions and how they think about workplace matters.

Union worker perceptions of their wages and benefits may be more distinct because of the collective bargaining process and high focus on their pensions and healthcare during contract negotiations. With one of the primary objectives of union representation and the collective bargaining process designed to increase member benefits, it is expected that the union workers will have a heightened attention and focus on their benefits. Research has shown a clear difference between union worker and non-union worker perceptions. Although non-union workers are not part of this study, it is important to consider how union representatives can influence their member's perceptions (Bryson & Freeman, 2012). Internal union practices and tactics cannot be ignored as a factor influencing union worker perceptions. External factors can

also have an impact on workplace perceptions, whether it is a down turn in the economy or economic growth, or a state's political environment, all filters into the workplace. The state of the economy, along with industry related matters affecting unionized employers, may be out of the control of an organization, but must be taken into consideration when studying the overall work environment and union worker perceptions.

One reason for workers becoming a union member is dissatisfaction with management. Unions provide a voice for workers so that their concerns can be heard by management and potentially addressed. Even when the reason for worker dissatisfaction is addressed, maintaining that voice is reason for remaining in a union (Hirschman, 1971). Furthermore, union members are more likely to express less fairness in how they are treated by management in comparison to non-union workers (Guest & Conway, 1999). A study conducted by Guest (2002) indicated a positive relationship between being a union member and a greater use of Human Resource Management (HRM) practices. The conclusion (Guest & Conway, 1999) indicates that union members tend to express greater dissatisfaction than non-union employees. This is attributed to the ability of union members having the opportunity to express their concerns to representatives and get them resolved by the employer. The increase use of HRM practices resulted in higher satisfaction levels among the workers. Guest's (2002) conclusion that higher satisfaction among union members is partially because of increased HRM practices is a reflection of how union worker issues and concerns are brought forward during the collective bargaining process. The Guest and Conway (1999) and Guest (2002) studies have contradictory conclusions related to union worker satisfaction levels, but it is important to gain a full appreciation for their respective influences on union members. Union members have lower job satisfaction levels stemming from formal representation because of their ability to express concerns they have with their work

environment and job-related matters. However, having structured Human Resource Management practices, often found in collective bargaining agreements, improves job satisfaction because it gives workers a process for resolving their issues at work.

Union members have union representatives that work on their behalf. Berger, Chris, Craig, Olson, and Boudreau (1983) found that union representatives influence the issues that their members perceive to be of concern within their workplace. Union representatives are individuals with opinions and provide their members with information and professional viewpoints which have an impact on the worker's perceptions. Union workers have expressed negative impressions of supervision and various elements of their work environment. Higher than average wages and benefits are reasons why union representatives promote the total compensation package to offset difficulty of the trade. Cronbach (1955) concluded that a union leader's own individual perceptions regarding their member's issues affects how they perceive the union members expressed concerns. Union leadership has an influence of the membership and their perceptions.

Union leaders will promote discontent among the workers prior to union elections in order to obtain votes, only to then emphasize the positive results they provide to members so that workers perceive that representatives are addressing their issues and concerns (Gordon & DeNisi, 1995). If a union leader has similar views on workplace issues as their membership, that can result in a deeper understanding of their concerns; however, when there is not a similar viewpoint, it can result in misperceptions. To better understand the dynamic of a union worker and their perceptions of their workplace surrounding, it is important to note that the structure and functionality of a union has a major influence to how attached the union member is to the union (Shore, Tetrick, Sinclair & Newton, 1994). Studies on the influence of union membership and

union representatives on worker perceptions tended to focus on the political aspect of union elections and the collective bargaining process. As union representative elections or contract negotiations take place, union representatives influence perceptions of wage and benefit levels among the members in order to gain votes or leverage into contract negotiations (Hammer, Bayazit, & Wazeter, 2009). Although there is little research on union representative's influence on Right-to-Work matters and union member perceptions related to RTW, it is important to include how union member perceptions of their compensation package is affected by their elected representatives. The degree to which a worker feels affiliated with their union affects the likelihood of their being influenced by representatives' and fellow union members' perceptions.

### **Literature Review Limitations**

There has been research conducted on employee perceptions on a wide range of workplace and work environment issues, such as wage, benefits, and working conditions. Studies on Right-to-Work matters predominantly focus on wage and benefit levels in RTW states comparing them with similar positions in NRTW states while research on the construction industry is on safety, training, turnover, and job site productivity. Review of the research literature indicates that many studies focus on worker perceptions on workplace matters such as; compensation, job a satisfaction and employee motivation, but nothing on how Right-to-Work legislation influences worker perceptions. A great deal of study on Right-to-Work states relates to wage and benefit level differences between workers in a RTW state and those employed in NRTW states.

Based on this literature, it has become apparent that research on RTW focused extensively on the legislation's effective on worker wages, a state's economic condition, influence on union density, and industry growth such as manufacturing. Studies on worker



perceptions focus significantly on issues related to job satisfaction, level of fair treatment from management, influence from union representation, and performance productivity, with no research on the link between RTW and union member perceptions. A key void in literature is the degree to which Right-to-Work status of union members influences these workers' overall perceptions of their wages, benefits, and working condition. This study will contribute to the literature as it determines how RTW status influences union worker perceptions.

CHAPTER 3  
METHODOLOGY

**Introduction**

This research is a qualitative study. There are a number of research instruments to obtain information on participant perceptions, both in the form of a qualitative and quantitative study design. In an effort to obtain detailed and in-depth information on union worker perceptions regarding their wages, benefits, working conditions, and Right-to-Work knowledge, the researcher concluded that conducting one-on-one participant interviews, along with focus group interviews, results in credible data for analysis. Interviews and focus groups provided the ideal opportunity for study participants to discuss and express their perceptions in a thorough and complete manner. With this study utilizing a qualitative research method the primary focus is on the study participants' detailed descriptions of their perceptions on their wages, benefits, and working conditions. This research approach enabled the researcher to explore concepts and perceptions among the study participants in a manner different from other research methods such as a survey. As study participants detailed their perceptions the researcher sought concepts that paint a picture of how union members perceive their wages, benefits, and working, then compared them to those in a RTW state, a NRTW state, and a transitioned RTW state.

**Qualitative Research Scrutiny**

Quantitative researchers present their study results in a numeric and graphical manner through the use of statistical analysis while qualitative researchers do so through the use of data themes and concepts found in participant responses and discussions. It is the use of participant responses and the researcher's ability to construct themes from the data where the credibility and conformability of the research is often called into question (Patton, 2002). In order to address

and limit issues affecting qualitative research credibility, researchers need to spend a great deal of time with the study participants, conduct thorough interviews, debrief the participants, and use purposeful sampling. In order to maintain dependability of qualitative research the use of triangulation and properly documented audit trails were conducted. A researcher can also minimize issues related to credibility of their qualitative study by being aware and acknowledging any relationships or personal biases related to the study.

### **Grounded Theory**

The Grounded Theory technique was used for this study. Applying the Grounded Theory approach to this research enabled concepts and categories to be identified among the data. Concepts gained through the units of analysis enabled the researcher to formulate categories of data for comparison purposes (Patton, 2002). The formulation of concepts from the data enabled similarities and differences among the union worker perceptions to be identified and categorized in whether they are from a RTW or NRTW state. The application of Grounded Theory for this study enabled the researcher to conduct a step by step process for the review of literature, data collection, data analysis, coding, comparison, and conclusion (Patton, 2002). The Grounded Theory approach began by a review of existing literature, the selection of the union workers in specific RTW and NRTW states, sound data collection protocols, appropriate data coding, analysis of the data and development of concepts and categories, comparison of data sources, and the emergence of study conclusions. The use of the Grounded Theory approach helped to ensure a credible and valid research process was conducted.

## **Individual Interviews**

One-on-one interviews were conducted with the Business Managers of the unions participating in this study. A union Business Manager is the top elected officer of the union and is responsible for representing the union membership's needs, in regards to their wages, benefits, and working conditions. The researcher obtained valuable information from the Business Managers who have a strong understanding of their membership's perceptions about their wages, benefits, and working conditions. This is due to their being responsible for representing these matters when negotiating a collective bargaining agreement with employers. It should be noted that Business Managers hold an elected office and are voted in or out of that position by the union membership. Acknowledging that the position of Business Manager is an elected one brings into the one-on-one interviews the issue of politics. The researcher minimized the factor of political concerns by emphasizing to the individual participant that their input and information was kept confidential. Any reference to what information is provided by each Business Manager was not referenced by specific names. To further ensure the confidentiality of the Business Managers participating in this study their actual United Association union number was not used during the data collection or study results. Each union was assigned a random number and only that number and the state they are located and operating in is referenced in this writing.

With an individual's personal background and life experiences having a significant impact on how they perceive their surroundings, a series of questions was designed to obtain information on non-work related items. In order to obtain a more rich understanding of union worker perceptions, several questions were asked on the topic of wages, benefits, and working conditions. Using a number of probing questions and factors to elicit participant perceptions provides a more accurate picture than just one or few questions (Patton, 2002). It is through

follow up questions that more detailed and thorough information was obtained about the participants' perceptions.

### **Focus Group Interviews**

The use of focus groups interviews enabled research participants the opportunity to provide the researcher with in depth details of their perceptions on the topics of wages, benefits, working conditions, and Right-to-Work legislation. A focus group interview guide was used to ensure that the predetermined questions designed to obtain union worker perceptions were asked, but the researcher had free-flowing discussions among the participants that resulted in additional valuable data. As the moderator of the focus group session it was critical to make sure the study participants remained on topic and not to deviate outside of the study issues or interviewer questions. Focus groups are often utilized to obtain information on participant opinions and viewpoints, so seeking a deep understanding of union worker perceptions can be done using this means of data collection (Patton, 2002). It must be noted that those participating in focus group sessions, both the researcher and study participants, were conducting performances. Each individual involved in the focus group played a role in this process. When it comes to sensitive research topics, focus groups may not be the ideal mode of data collection, but with this study being on the topic of union worker perceptions, the researcher experienced fluid discussions among the participants on the topic of wages, benefits, working conditions, and Right-to-Work legislation. Focus group participant input and information were all kept confidential. To further ensure the confidentiality of the union members participating in this study their actual United Association union number was not be used or referenced throughout the study. Each union was assigned a random number and only that number and the state in which they are located and operating is referenced here.

## **Interview Guide**

In order to maintain consistent one-on-one interview and focus group sessions, an interview guide was designed and utilized in this research to keep both forms of participant discussions on track. The questions were designed to obtain study participant demographic information along with their perceptions on wages, benefits, working conditions, and Right-to-Work information. The empirical research questions were designed to elicit useful information but also to form engaging discussions on the research topic between the researcher and interviewee and focus group participants.

The International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans (IFEBP) is a nonprofit research and educational institution that provides information and training sessions to pension fund and health and welfare program trustees. The IFEBP has a membership throughout the United States consisting of union and employer benefits plan boards of trustees and union organizations. This study researcher has been an active member of the IFEBP for over twenty-two years. The research department at the IFEBP has indicated interest in this study of union member perceptions of wages, benefits, and working conditions and how it is influenced by Right-to-Work status. The IFEBP research department reviewed this study's interview and focus group question guide and provided feedback and input on the questions and their wording. Suggestions include word and phrase changes, in order to obtain deeper participation responses, and adjustments to the order of the questions asked to improve flow of the interviews and focus groups. The IFEBP input on each of the questions has been incorporated in the final study interview guide and it enabled union member perceptions for this researcher's data collection to be rich and insightful.

## **Setting**

The union workers in the mechanical construction industry who participated in this study work and live in the states of Colorado, Ohio, Nebraska, Nevada, Pennsylvania, Texas, and West Virginia. Participants are active members of the United Association of Plumbers and Pipefitters which are signatory to firms in the mechanical construction industry. The states of Colorado, Ohio, Nebraska, Nevada, Pennsylvania, Texas, and West Virginia were selected for this study based upon their Right-to-Work status. The specific United Association local chapters were chosen based on their jurisdiction within each of those states.

The one-on-one interview with the union Business Managers were conducted at the respective participant's physical office and union hall. The focus group interviews with active union members took place at the union hall. Holding the individual interviews and focus group sessions at the respective union Business Manager offices and union halls was done for the convenience of those volunteering to participate. The participants were aware of the location and comfortable in that environment. Union worker participants for this study were identified with the assistance of each respective union's Business Manager. The Business Managers sought voluntary union members who had been active in the union and within the mechanical construction industry for at least ten years at the time of the interviews.

## **Researcher Role and Biases**

The researcher conducting this study, it is important for the integrity of the process and credibility of the results that I indicate my biases going into this project. I have been the Executive Vice President of Laurel Mechanical Contractors Association, Inc. (Laurel MCA) since May, 1995. Laurel MCA is a nonprofit trade association that is responsible for representing employers who are in the unionized mechanical construction industry located in the

fourteen county area of Southwestern Pennsylvania. The Association is an advocate for industry employers and is responsible for representing management on issues related to collective bargaining, grievances, labor relation matters, apprenticeship training, and union member health and welfare and pension programs.

In my capacity as the Executive Vice President of Laurel MCA I am Chairman of the union's health and welfare program. As Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the United Association of Plumbers and Pipefitters Local Union 354, I am responsible for managing the health and welfare program and representing the employer's interests in regards to their unionized workers' healthcare plan. This plan consists of approximately 550 active union workers and 250 retirees. The healthcare fund has an annual budget of nine million dollars and reserves equally approximately \$22 million. In addition, I am a management trustee on two industry pension programs that provide retirement benefits to the local union members. As a management trustee on the United Association of Plumbers and Pipefitters Local Union 354 pension fund, I am responsible for representing the employers on this pension program which has approximately \$95 million in investment assets. I am also a management trustee on the Building Trades Pension Fund of Western Pennsylvania that has investment assets worth approximately \$100 million.

Since this research seeks to better understand union worker perceptions of not only wages and working conditions, but benefits, it is important that I acknowledge my 23-year professional career representing employers who are responsible for funding these benefit programs. Although my professional career has been representing employer interests in the unionized mechanical construction industry, which results in a full understanding of the difficulty these firms have in



providing the costly benefits, I am fully confident that this bias did not influence my ability to obtain unbiased information on union worker perceptions of their compensation.

The researcher being directly involved in the one-on-one interviews and focus group sessions it is important to acknowledge a number of issues relevant to this study. The focus of the researcher is to gather data, but when it is completed through interviews and focus groups, the researcher also needs to listen and moderate the interview process. When it comes to the focus groups sessions, the researcher needs to guide the various participant discussions in a way that keeps everyone from deviating from the research topic, while not trying to dictate what the study participants are discussing. As the researcher, any personal biases of opinions on the topic of union worker wages, benefits, and working conditions was not expressed during both the individual and focus group interviews. This was accomplished through the use of an interview question guide designed and reviewed by the International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans (IFEBP). Following and adhering to the interview guide helped to ensure that each individual interview and focus group session participant received the same questions that were written to not include any researcher bias.

### **Study Design Strengths**

The strength of the research design is that participants were more truthful and thorough with their responses when faced with follow up in depth questioning. Providing study participants the opportunity to complete a formal survey in private and when they are best able to put the proper time into it would increase the level of thoughtful and truthful responses, but conducting an extensive interview ensures detailed responses and explanation into their answers through probing follow-up questions. Time constraints of conducting individual or focus group interviews did not enable 100% participation among the union member population, but an

appropriate participant sampling providing in depth interviews resulted in valuable data for analysis and conclusions.

### **Research Limitations**

This study was conducted using individual participant and focus group interviews. The study design and qualitative information allowed for analysis to be completed on the participant data and core themes to be identified. The interview guide consisted of 30 questions providing study participants with the opportunity to describe their perceptions and the researcher the ability to seek in-depth responses for a thorough understanding of the information provided. The first section of the interviews and focus groups focused on the union worker demographics. The second section of the interview guide obtained information on the perceptions of their compensation, benefits, and working conditions, with the last section gathering information on their views and understanding of Right-to-Work legislation and issues. The inclusion of various items, from both individual characteristics and their work environment, during the interviews results in less standard measurement error (Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 2011). Personal participant interviews for this study resulted in honest responses from the study participants. Data from a qualitative study using individual interviews and focus groups has increased concern for bias with the interviewer as compared to a quantitative analysis of completed participant surveys (Patton, 2002). Conducting interviews with a certain sample of the study population does not obtain as much data as surveying the entire population. When conducting participant interviews the data gathered by the conversational questioning results in interpretations by the interviewer that inherently include internal biases (Patton, 2002). A professional and experienced researcher is mindful of this and able to put aside any biases they bring into their study, data collection process, and analysis.

A number of assumptions were made going into this study, such as the interview question guide being utilized provides an accurate determination of participant perceptions and that the subjects responded honestly to each question. Only unionized mechanical construction workers from the states of Colorado, Nebraska, Nevada, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, and West Virginia participated in the study. This study is only representative of each unionized mechanical construction workforce in these seven states and does not include any mechanical construction worker that is non-union.

Data collection involves researcher and participant interviews so the assumption is that participants are providing honest responses, yet there is no ability to properly verify the truth of information provided. The use of a survey instrument was considered for this study but does not provide the opportunity for participants to write in responses or include short answers to expand upon their answers. Study participants likely want to expand upon an answer beyond the multiple choice responses provided on the questionnaire (Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 2011) since the subject matter involves their perceptions, which an in-depth interview can better obtain.

Although the purposeful sample of Colorado, Nebraska, Nevada, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, and West Virginia unionized construction workforce was used for data collection, the different backgrounds and experiences held by the study participants led to varying responses without the ability to account for each individual factor. Being unable to account for all the factors influencing an individual's perception about an issue is a limitation for this study. A number of variables will be utilized in order to provide a casual statement (Walliman, 2005). Participant factors in this study that affect perceptions include age, gender, job position, job tenure, education, family member union heritage, and knowledge of Right-to-Work legislation. Union workers within these construction industry settings may not result in findings that can be

extrapolated to a larger population or other industries outside of construction because of job elements and working conditions that maybe dramatically different than the mechanical trade. This study does not evaluate the perceptions of non-union workers in the mechanical construction industry, nor does it include other building trades unions.

A limitation of this research is the participant sample, which limits the generalizability of the study results and conclusions. This study involves union members, specifically in the mechanical construction industry, and the researcher does not expect union workers in other trades, such as electrical, sheet metal, or iron works, to respond differently about their perception on wages, benefits, and working conditions as the sample participating in this study. Each of the building trade unions are structured and operate in a similar manner with no significant difference that should result in varying perceptions related to Right-to-Work status.

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

In this research union worker perceptions of wages, benefits, and working conditions are studied with the assumption that there are differences among the union members who work and reside in a Right-to-Work state and those who do not. The study will seek to determine the degree to which RTW influences union worker perceptions. A conceptual framework is used in research to present a visual of the topic is, the intention of the study, and the major factors included in the overall process (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012). The conceptual framework for this study places the union worker perceptions at the center of the design, with the key variables influencing the study participants' perceptions to the left. Although there may be additional variables impacting individual perceptions, those identified are too exhaustive for the intention of this study. The three perception topics to be studied are: (1) wages, (2) benefits, and (3) working conditions, which are found on the right side of the conceptual framework [Figure 4].

Additional factors emerged during interviews and focus group sessions and are included in the data analysis section of this study.

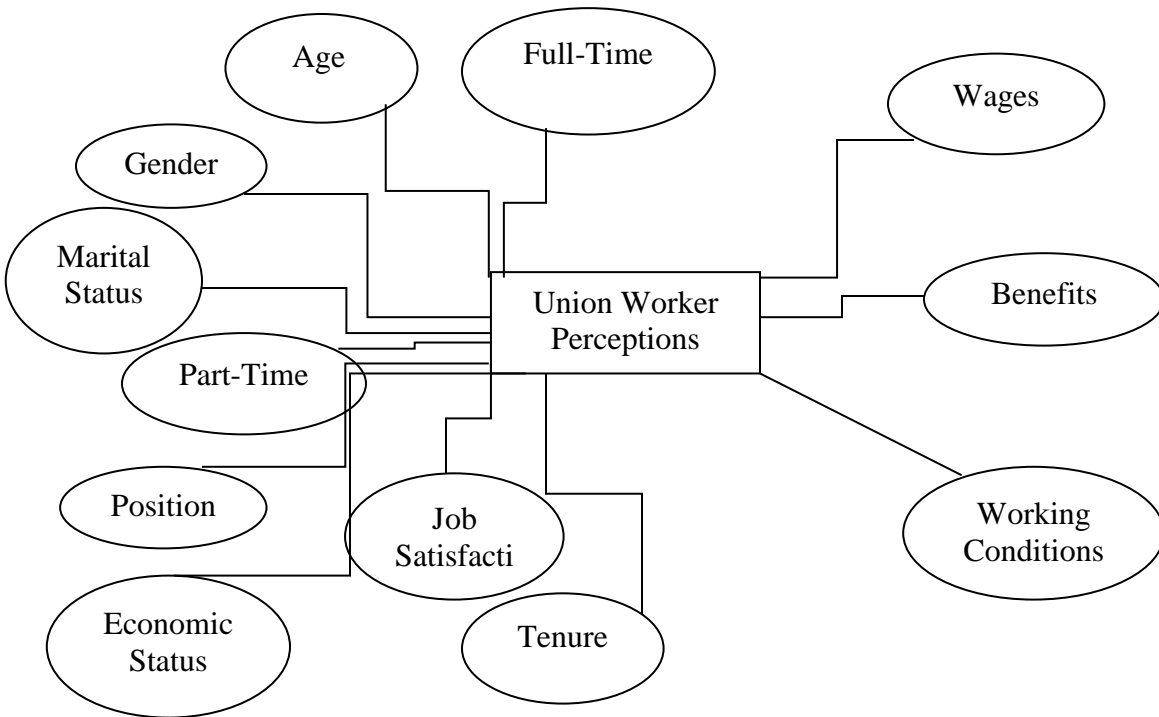


Figure 4. Conceptual framework (Variables impacting union member perceptions).

Social Exchange Theory provides insight as to how union worker perceptions of wages, benefits, and working conditions may be influenced by the ongoing transactions and interactions among union members, but also with their signatory employers. This theory provides support that individual worker perceptions are not absent from the influence of being a member of a union along with having an interdependent relationship with their employer. Union member perceptions of the core work-related elements of their profession was examined with respect to how Right-to-Work status of a state where they live and work influences those perceptions.

## **Data Source, Sampling, and Target Population**

Data sources were drawn from individual interviews and focus group sessions within the union mechanical construction industry. Participant union workers in this study are from the states of Colorado, Nebraska, Nevada, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, and West Virginia. Nebraska, Nevada, and Texas are Right-to-Work states, while Colorado, Pennsylvania, and Ohio are not. West Virginia enacted RTW legislation in February of 2016 and is considered a transitional state for the purpose of this study. Union mechanical construction workers within these seven states received a notification of the study seeking their participation, details of the interview and focus group process, times, dates, and locations. A volunteer participation acceptance notification was also provided. Participants in the study remain anonymous.

Colorado, Nebraska, Nevada, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, and West Virginia are well suited for this research study. Nebraska has been a Right-to-Work state since 1947, with Nevada passing RTW in 1951, and Texas in 1993, while Colorado, Pennsylvania, and Ohio, have never had RTW legislation enacted. The RTW status of these states have been in place for many years and provide a rich perspective on this topic by the union members working in each state because of the work culture formed from the long term history of each state's RTW status. Participant data from the state of West Virginia provide valuable insight into union workers' perceptions as this state recently went through the transition into having RTW legislation signed into law.

The researcher contacted each mechanical construction industry's labor and management representative from each of the seven states for their approval to participate in the study and agree with the assisting of organizing the individual interviews and focus groups. Purposeful random sampling met the needs of this study. In order to obtain data comparing union worker perceptions of wages, benefits, and working conditions from RTW and non-RTW states, a

population sample must be included from a state with that particular classification. This study has a specific research focus which requires purposeful random sampling in order to obtain applicable data for analysis (Walliman, 2005). The rationale for purposeful sampling is to ensure that the sample selected provides the data on union workers from a RTW state and from a NRTW state. A random sample strategy would not enable a clear distinction of RTW status and therefore not provide data on the influence that the RTW law has on union worker perceptions.

The population sample from each state consists of similar union worker demographics, characteristics, and backgrounds. The mechanical construction industry within each state has similarities related to the type of work performed, trade training through an apprenticeship program, and union membership activities and norms. Although each union's wage and economic package may differ in amounts, they are similar in having an hourly wage, health and welfare programs, and pension benefits.

Study participant sample backgrounds were explored through 10 initial questions during the interviews. Each union's Business Manager was interviewed one-on-one to gain their perceptions on the study topics regarding their own perceptions along with their memberships. Focus groups consisted of six to eight active union construction workers from each respective union. There was no compensation provided to the study participants. Based on the time of day for the focus group sessions, food and drink was provided to the participants. Study participants had the option to voluntarily withdraw and cease participation in the study at any time. There were no alternatives for participation in this study. No participant withdrew from the study.

There is minimal potential risk with this research. The research topic and interview questions asked to the participants did not induce stress or invade their privacy or issues related to confidentiality. Risks associated with participation in this study were minimal, but included

focus group members disclosing to others outside the study details of the session discussions. Ground rules, including the importance of keeping the session confidential, were reviewed prior to each session. Study participants are active union members in the mechanical construction industry and the confidentiality of their responses will not enable any potential negative reaction from their union representatives or employer.

Study participants were informed about the nature of the research so that they could decide whether to voluntarily participate. Participants received a consent form that outlined the study purpose, how the data would be obtained, how the results would be used, what their participation would involve, and that their participation is voluntary. The strict protection of each participant's confidentiality and privacy was highlighted in the form and disclosed that pseudonyms were used for each individual. Any personal information detailed during the interviews and focus group sessions was not included in the study. Once the project is completed any forms linking the participant name to their pseudonym will be destroyed. Although the risks for this study were minimal, they were outlined and presented to each participant.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection consisted of the researcher conducting one-on-one participant interviews and focus group sessions. The use of interviews enabled data to be collected in a timely fashion and in a cost-effective manner (Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 2011). The interview guide was designed to obtain participant information including, their age, gender, ethnicity, education, type of position held, and work tenure, along with their perceptions on a wide range of compensation and work-related issues, in addition to views on Right-to-Work matters. The interviews were semi-structure with the use of open-ended questions to elicit detailed responses.



The type of position the union worker has within the mechanical construction industry (e.g., service maintenance, project supervision, estimating, job site construction) was indicated during the interview. In order to obtain information on participant perceptions of their compensation and working conditions, a detailed and descriptive set of questions was asked to elicit their views. A series of questions focused on Right-to-Work legislation to obtain a clear understanding of what the participants knew about the law and how it may influence their perceptions of compensation and overall work environment. After consultation with the union Business Managers participating in the study, the researcher determined appropriate interview and focus group meeting dates and times. Each of the sessions were held at the respective union hall. Site approval forms were obtained from each union Business Manager and provided to Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval prior to conducting the research. Once each site approval was reviewed and approved by the IRB, the interview and focus groups were scheduled and conducted accordingly.

The study participants were notified of the locations and times well in advance of each session. The researcher traveled to each site location in Colorado, Nebraska, Nevada, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, and West Virginia to directly complete each session and gather participant data. The one-on-one interview with the union Business Managers took place at each physical office located in the union hall. The focus group interviews with active union members took place at the union hall. Holding both the individual interviews and focus group sessions at the respective union Business Managers office and union halls was convenient for those participating. The participants were well aware of the location and were comfortable in that environment. The researcher physically went to each study site to conduct the individual

interviews and focus group sessions in order to obtain the participant data. No third party was used for data collection.

The information gained during the semi-structured interviews and focus groups was audio recorded with proper electronic devices and transcribed in the days immediately following the sessions to ensure clear referencing by the researcher. Each interview and focus group lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. As the researcher, observing the physical behavior of the study participants during the interviews and focus group sessions was a critical component of the data collection. During the interviews, participants were not made aware of my observations so to not affect their behavior and remaining question responses. Each participant was provided a number that was used to reference them during the session. This helped to ensure privacy and confidentiality in the study report and conclusions. If the individual number was not utilized the participants were referenced by their home state.

### **Data Analysis**

The relationship between union mechanical construction worker perceptions regarding their wages, compensation, fringe benefits, and working conditions was analyzed in relationship with their state's Right-to-Work status. The RTW work status, along with other variables influencing union worker perceptions, such as individual demographics, work position, tenure in the industry, and union membership were analyzed through the use of coding responses for broader concepts and themes. Seeking consistent themes from participant responses enabled numerous variables to be analyzed resulting in a clearer understanding of how they influence one another (Ritchey, 2008). Similarities and differences in union member perceptions, from the Right-to-Work states of Nebraska, Nevada, and Texas and the NRTW states of Colorado, Ohio,

and Pennsylvania, were identified, along with the perspective of the workers in West Virginia, which recently passed the legislation.

The audio recording of the interviews and focus groups was transcribed immediately following the sessions to ensure no loss of information. Each audio recording has been stored safely in a secure and protected location. Hard copies of each interview and focus group session have been printed and stored in a secure fire proof location. Once the individual interviews and focus group sessions were transcribed, the coding of the information took place. The use of grounded theory coding was utilized by the researcher to determine the various coding categories of the data. The researcher identified key words, sentences, phrases, concepts, and themes that emerged from the individual interviews and focus groups. The analysis process focused on categorizing, ordering, and summarizing the data. Upon completion of the interviews and focus groups, the researcher completed post-interview notes, reviewed and refined initial information, transcribed the audio recordings, developed concept categories and themes, re-coded, and then synthesized the categories.

### **Participant Selection**

The one-on-one interviews were carried out with mechanical construction trade union Business Managers in Colorado, Nebraska, Nevada, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, and West Virginia. The focus groups consisting of six to eight volunteer union worker participants from each union located in the seven states were contacted with the assistance of the union Business Manager. Focus group participant requirements include union members currently working in the field, between the ages of 25 and 55, who have been in the union and working in the industry for at least ten years. This age range enabled the study participants to have working experience in

the mechanical construction industry, be a union member for a period of time, and to have formed solid perceptions of their hourly wage, benefits, and working conditions.

There is a membership list maintained at the union hall where as the Business Manager can randomly scan the list, contact the member, and seek those who voluntarily agree to participate in the focus group. Building trade unions have a hiring hall list consisting of their membership names and contact information. The list is used to randomly select union members being called out to work. Union Business Managers know their members and were able to assist in determining those qualified active union workers who would be willing and able to participate in the focus group sessions. The Business Manager used this list to contact by such members phone and seek interest in participation in this study. Once verbal commitment was made a formal consent form was provided for review and signature. The input provided by the union workers who met the stipulated age, maturity, and experience in the industry, according to the researcher and based on the literature review, resulted in valuable data for analysis.

Based on the industry of the research being unionized mechanical construction the gender of the study participants is primarily male. No gender is excluded from this study, but the demographic characteristics of the unionized mechanical construction industry leads to a strong probability of a majority being male participants.

### **Participating Local Union Information**

The three United Association (UA) of Plumbers and Pipefitters local unions participating in this study that are located in the Right-to-Work states are Nebraska, Nevada, and Texas. For the purpose of this study, the U. A. local union from Texas will be referenced as Local Union 1, the local from Nebraska as Local Union 2, and the local from Nevada as Local Union 3. The three U. A. local unions participating in the study that are located in the Non-Right-to-Work states are Colorado, Ohio, and

Pennsylvania. The U. A. local union from Colorado is referenced as Local Union 4, the local from Ohio as Local Union 5, and the local from Pennsylvania is referenced as Local Union 6. The one U. A. local union participating in this study that is located in a recently RTW transitioned state is from West Virginia. For the purpose of this study the U. A. local union from West Virginia is referenced as Local Union 7.

The current level of union membership in each of the local unions that participated in this study are as follows: Texas is 1,150; Nebraska is 750; Nevada is 1,200; Colorado is 370; Ohio is 900; Pennsylvania is 550; and West Virginia is 285. The following are the years of service to the mechanical construction industry that each of the Business Managers (B. M.) currently has: the B. M. in Texas has 47 years of experience, Nebraska B. M. has 25 years, Nevada B. M. has 31 years, Colorado B. M. has 35 years, Ohio B. M. has 42 years, the Pennsylvania B. M. has 20 years, and the B. M. in West Virginia has 23 years.

Regarding the focus group from each state in this study, the following are the number of participants in each focus group session and the range of years of experience in the mechanical construction industry they have; the Texas local union had eight members in the focus group with years of experience ranging from 10 to 44, Nebraska had six participants ranging from nine to 23 years of experience, Nevada had eight participants ranging from seven to 43 years of experience, Colorado had seven participants ranging from 12 to 40 years of experience, Ohio had eight participants ranging from nine to 33 years of experience, Pennsylvania had five participants ranging from five to 30 years of experience, and West Virginia had six participants with years of experience ranging from nine to 40.

## **Communication Procedures**

The researcher reached out to Mechanical Contractors Association of America (MCAA) industry colleagues in various Right-to-Work and non-Right-to-Work states to discuss the research topic, purpose, and data collection methodology. The initial contact was through email and then followed up with meeting face to face during a national convention. Direct phone calls were made to those MCAA colleagues who did not attend the March 2016 MCAA National convention that was held during this time period in Orlando, Florida. After getting confirmation from those industry colleagues who indicated their respective United Association Business Managers would be interested and consider participating in the study, the researcher then reached out to the B. M. directly through email detailing the study, the need for a one-on-one interview and the setting up of a focus group of six to eight of their union members. Union Business Managers were then asked to complete and submit a letter of support for participating in the study along with a site approval form. Upon receiving all the voluntary acceptance letters, dates, and locations for the interviews were scheduled and confirmed.

## **Privacy/Confidentiality**

All study participant information and data input obtained during this research has been kept private and confidential. No participant data collected or utilized in the study and final product is linked directly to any participant by name. Protections of participant's confidentiality and privacy has been in place and include pseudonyms for each individual. Personal information detailed during the interview and focus group were not be included in the study report. Any forms linking a participant's name to their pseudonym was destroyed upon completion of the research and dissertation defense. Research data and participant information has been stored in a

password protected location with only the researcher having direct access. Data will be retained for at least three years in compliance with federal regulations.

### **Ethical Aspects of Study**

Throughout this study, all participants (union construction workers and union Business Managers) were treated with the highest level of honesty and engagement to ensure proper ethical standards were met. All participants were provided in advance research information, including the intent of the study, so an informed decision could be made about their participation. With study participation in this research being voluntary, providing this initial level of information assisted in a more positive response for the focus group interviews (Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 2011). Individuals coming to the focus group with an understanding of the research topic and issues to be discussed appeared more comfortable and ready to actively participate.

Based on the study design and research topic, there was no expectation that participants would have any potential to be harmed, either physically or emotionally. Proper permission was obtained from the study participants as they were informed that complete confidentiality of their information would be maintained, along with their anonymity. Emphasizing the anonymity of the study participants provided the environment for more honest responses (Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 2011). In order to maintain personal dignity and privacy among the study participants no information that could identify the individual is will be released without written consent. Numeric coding was used for participant identification and study data has been stored in a secure area with limited access (Walliman, 2005). Although privacy can't be fully guaranteed, when it involves focus group sessions, the practices stipulated here enhanced the level of confidentiality among the participants. When a qualitative study involves focus group sessions, the concern of

participant privacy is one that must be raised and addressed. When study participants come together to form and voluntarily engage in a focus group, it is essential that the researcher emphasize the importance of confidentiality of what takes place during the session. The voluntary consent form that each study participant signed prior to the start of the research detailed the significance of trust and privacy among each of the participants.

The researcher conducted himself with the highest level of ethical standards and honesty which created a foundation for the entire process and those who were involved. The gathering, storing, analyzing, and presenting the study data, results, and participant information was done with the strictest privacy safeguards in place. The researcher was fully mindful of his own biases and worked to ensure that all verbal and nonverbal responses during the interview sessions did not indicate or reflect any personal biases on the subject matter or participant responses. The research findings and final report was provided to any study participant who requested a copy.

### **Validity of Study**

Studying participant perceptions raises the issue of content validity. The degree to which a study design obtains the information sought is content validity (Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 2011). It is difficult to conduct an extensive assessment of an individual's perception on an issue and the degree to which this can be done relates to the level of proper measurement tools being utilized. Although content validity is an issue, there is confidence that the interviews and focus groups properly identified the union workers perceptions of their wages, compensation, work environment, and Right-to-Work knowledge. The in-depth interviews resulted in credible research data that yielded rich information from the sample population. Respondents are more willing and able to share their perceptions when given follow-up questions.



With data collection coming from union workers in the mechanical construction industry, sampling validity was an issue in whether this sample reflects all union workers in different industries. Purposeful sampling was done in order to obtain data from a specific source because it was required for the study and to better answer the research question (Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 2011). The information provided from this study is not expected to reflect other industries, such as manufacturing and higher education that have unionized employees. Construct validity is the degree the research design measures the intended goal of the study (Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 2011). With this study seeking to gain a deeper understanding of how the Right-to-Work status of a state influences union workers perceptions, construct validity could have been addressed by expanding the number of trade unions in both RTW and NRTW states, along with the inclusion of additional variables that influence individual perceptions. Although this was not the scope of this research, this could be reason for future studies. Temporal validity must be acknowledged with this study because it was conducted during one specific time frame, the year 2017, and not over multiple time periods.

The researcher has over 20 years of professional work experience in the mechanical trade association industry that is a part of this study. The researcher fully understands the industry, has built professional relationships within the mechanical construction industry, among union Business Managers, and many union members in the field. Professionals at the International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans reviewed both the individual Business Managers and focus group interview guides and provided their feedback and suggestions for improvements, which were incorporated. Data collected for the study followed standard qualitative research practices, including audio recordings of the sessions, thorough transcriptions, coding, theme determination, analysis, and formal conclusions. Themes that stem from the sample population

data have external validity and transferability as it is reflective of the mechanical construction industry throughout the United States.

### **Reliability of Study**

Data for this research was collected through seven individual interviews with union Business Managers from Nebraska, Nevada, and Texas, each a Right-to-Work states, along with Business Managers from Colorado, Ohio, and Pennsylvania each a non-Right-to-Work and one interview from West Virginia, a recently transitioned RTW state. A total of seven focus group sessions were held with each of the United Association local union members, consisting of six to eight participants. Each of the seven unions were from the same industry, that being the mechanical construction building trades. Using the same interview guide for the seven individual Business Manager interviews, along with the same interview guide for the seven focus groups, all involving similar trade unions from the same industry, helps make this study and the conclusions reliable.

### **Summary of Study**

This qualitative study extends existing research on union mechanical construction worker perceptions of their compensation and working conditions, along with prior research on employee wages and economic effects from Right-to-Work laws. Much has been written on how Right-to-Work legislation results in lower worker wages, lower union density, and economic and industrial development, but a deeper understanding of the differences in perceptions among union workers in RTW and NRTW states yet to be reached. Comprehensive participant interviews were conducted to obtain valuable and useful information. The mechanical construction unions located in Nebraska, Nevada, and Texas, and Colorado, Ohio, and Pennsylvania were the first having Right-to-Work laws, and the latter three not being RTW

states. Data from union members, from the recently transitioned state of West Virginia, provided insight to possible perception differences related to RTW status.

Data obtained from the one-on-one interviews and focus group sessions were analyzed seeking consistent themes and core constructs to determine the influence of Right-to-Work laws on union worker perceptions of their wages, benefits, and working conditions. This study provides valuable insight to what influences union worker perceptions that can be useful in enhancing labor and management relations. Although this research is not intended to be political, the findings may be beneficial to politicians and advocates on either side of the Right-to-Work issue, if the conclusions support their already-determined views. Conclusions and suggestions for future research on this topic are provided in Chapter 5.

## CHAPTER 4

### DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

#### **Summary of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to better understand how the Right-to-Work status of a state influences union members perceptions about their wages, benefits, and working conditions. A series of seven in-depth one-on-one interviews and seven focus group sessions were held among a sample of union mechanical construction workers from three Right-to-Work states, three Non-Right-to-Work states and one state that recently transitioned to RTW. The interviews and focus group sessions were designed to gain a deeper understanding of how a state's RTW status influences union workers perceptions. Participant interviews were conducted to identify perceptions that could not be directly observable or gained through a survey instrument. The study participant sample consisted of union workers from Colorado, Nebraska, Nevada, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, and West Virginia. A literature review was conducted and resulted in propositions presented in Chapter 3 that focused primarily on how RTW legislation impacts worker wages, union density, and a state's economic development.

Study participants were selected because of their knowledge and years of experience working in the union mechanical construction industry. Each participant was asked a series of questions related to their perceptions and knowledge about Right-to-Work legislation. The sample provided a broad range of perceptions related to their positions, compensation, and work environment that enabled themes to be identified and analyzed. The structured interviews and focus group sessions resulted in thorough discussions that provided a valuable forum for the building of an on-going dialogue and evaluation of participant responses. In this chapter, data are provided on union worker perceptions of their wages, benefits, and working conditions. Those

perceptions will be compared and contrasted among the union workers in a Right-to-Work state, Non-Right-to-Work state, and a state recently transitioned to Right-to-Work.

Responses from the United Association of Plumbers and Pipefitters union members provided a thorough description of their perceptions. Data analysis resulted in a series of themes that categorize the worker's perceptions. Themes that were formed include; wage satisfaction & benefits, employee & employer relationship: worker appreciation & employer feedback, work environment & job-site safety, anti-union sentiment, implication of Right-to-Work, being a union member in a Right-to-Work state, and concerns for the future. The literature review identified numerous studies on Right-to-Work (RTW) states that indicated a lower hourly wage rate for workers in those states compared to non-Right-to-Work (NRTW) states. Findings in this study confirm the lower hourly wages in RTW states as union members indicated so in their responses. Participants from RTW states went further in that perceptions expressed on lower wages included issues related to those workers not being paid enough for the responsibility they have on construction sites or in comparison to how they perceive what contractor owners make because of the personal purchases made. The literature also reflects the pro-business and anti-union environment in RTW states as reflected in lower pay and lower level of union membership and density within the overall workforce. Data in this study reinforced that sentiment as RTW participants expressed a sense of how unions are not accepted and appreciated in their state. A number of union member responses reflect how individuals in their state have a deep anti-union view and express it openly.

The data analysis and conclusion chapters confirm previous studies that indicate RTW states have an average hourly wage rate lower than NRTW states and this study added to that literature with the degree to which the union workers expressed their deep perception through

seeing what construction firm owners purchase; such as large homes, nice vehicles, and vacations. The factor of how union workers view their hourly wage, through owner purchases, added to the previous studies by emphasizing their perception of a lower wage rate in RTW states. As literature shows, RTW states have a pro-business environment and anti-union leanings and data in this study confirms that while adding to this literature with the truly deep rooted anti-union culture expressed through the comments that study participants have experienced on job-sites and among the general public. What this study adds to literature on the anti-union culture of RTW states is how union members in RTW states have formed a sincere appreciation for being a union member in a RTW state knowing how difficult and limited that is for workers.

### **Research Questions**

The research will seek to better understand the following overarching question:

“How do the Perceptions of Wages, Fringe Benefits, and Working Conditions Differ among Unionized Mechanical Construction Workers in Right-to-Work and Non-Right-to-Work States?”

The research will seek to gain a deeper understanding of the following sub questions:

- 1) How does Right-to-Work status influence unionized mechanical construction worker perceptions of their wages?
- 2) How does Right-to-Work status influence unionized construction workers perceptions of their fringe benefits?
- 3) How does Right-to-Work status influence unionized mechanical construction workers perceptions of their working conditions?

## **Data Collection and Qualitative Methods**

Qualitative research methods provide the opportunity for study participants to openly discuss and detail their thoughts, views, and perceptions through interviews. Participant interviews and focus groups were selected for data collection to gain thorough and descriptive responses from the union workers on topics that involve their own individual perceptions. The study participants were all United Association of Plumbers and Pipefitters union members that work in the mechanical construction industry within the United States. Semi-structured interviews with union Business Managers and focus group sessions with union members consisted of approximately 30 questions designed to elicit in-depth details of their perceptions related to their workplace and work environment. The responses provided were analyzed and core themes and constructs were identified for presentation.

An equal number of three Right-to-Work states and three Non-Right-to-Work states were utilized to provide a sound contrast for comparing the union worker perceptions. The inclusion of a transitioned RTW state provided valuable information on union worker perceptions of their wages, benefits, and working conditions as their state recently had the legislation proposed, considered, and subsequently enacted. The researcher contacted each union by email to obtain voluntary participation in the study and to then schedule the individual interviews and focus groups. Once participation was agreed and a date scheduled the researcher traveled to each union hall to conduct the interviews and focus group sessions. There was no third party utilized in this data collection process. Each interview and focus group was audio recorded. Once each session was completed the audio recording was transcribed into written format. The audio recordings and original transcriptions are protected and secured in a fire proof safe. The

researcher fully reviewed the formal transcriptions to analyze and determine core themes and constructs for this chapter.

### **Demographic and Geographical Information**

A total of 55 United Association union members participated in this study. Seven of the participants were elected union Business Managers that the researcher held a one-on-one interview with at their union hall office. A total of 48 union members participated in the focus group sessions. Each of the seven focus group sessions consisted of approximately five to eight participants. Each interview and focus group lasted between one and a half to two hours. Participant years of experience in the mechanical construction industry ranged from five to 44 years. Taking the total number of years of experience per study participant, and dividing it by the number of union members in the study, the average mechanical construction years of experience was 21 years. As for gender, 54 participants were male along with one female.

Seven local unions participated in this study. Three local unions were located in Right-to-Work states, three were located in Non-Right-to-Work states, and one is in a state that recently transitioned to RTW. The geographic locations of the participating local unions and their total union membership size are: Colorado (370), Nebraska (750), Nevada (1,200), Ohio (900), Pennsylvania (550), Texas (1150), and West Virginia (285). Nebraska, Nevada, and Texas are each Right-to-Work states, Colorado, Ohio, and Pennsylvania are Non-Right-to-Work states, and West Virginia transitioned to RTW in 2017. Each United Association local union's actual charter number was not used in this writing in order to protect their privacy. Each local union was assigned a random number for this writing or will be referred to by the state their jurisdiction is located within.



## **Study Participant Responses by Category and Theme**

### **Satisfaction: Wages and Benefits**

The findings from the study's first core issue of wages provided a distinct difference between union worker perceptions in Right-to-Work (RTW) states and those residing and working in Non-Right-to-Work (NRTW) states. Satisfaction among the union workers regarding their hourly wage level, based upon whether or not their state is RTW, was not surprising and was consistent with conclusions from other studies. States that are RTW have lower hourly wage rates than NRTW states and the input from the union workers during the focus group sessions in Nebraska, Nevada, and Texas reflected their perception that they have a lower hourly wage compared to those union workers from Colorado, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. Wages provided to each union member performing work in the mechanical construction trade is important to each individual but data suggest that those in Right-to-Work states are far less satisfied with their wage level than those union workers in Non-Right-to-Work states.

A clear consensus among the union members participating in this study is Right-to-Work states have a lower than average hourly wage compared to those workers in Non-Right-to-Work states. Whether RTW states have lower hourly wage rates than NRTW states is not the focus of this study, however. The perception that union workers have about their hourly wage rate and whether their state's RTW status influences those perceptions is a part of the research. There were consistent initial comments made from union members in each state, such as the following from Texas, "RTW equals Right-to-Work less", "Speaking about the rest of the nation our wages are very low", "I think it (wage) could be higher, and "I just got a raise and I'm still not happy". Each of these initial brief comments were made by those individual union members participating in the focus group. Similar thoughts about RTW were made during the Colorado focus group

with a member stating, “It is the Right-to-Work for less” and a union worker in Nevada stating RTW is the “Right-to-Work for less”. It did not appear that these similar responses were a formal reference about RTW but just commonly used phrase. All of the seven states’ focus groups did not state these exact quotes but each expressed the notion that wages were lower in RTW states because of the legislation.

Whether the study participants were from a RTW state or not there was general consensus that the legislation leads to working for less pay. There was expressed concern that in RTW states there were more non-union employers, resulting in the lowering and pulling down of union wage rates. Two union members from NRTW states, with the first being from Ohio, discussed how “non-union growth hurts wages” and “RTW decreases non-union wages, which hurts overall market and union wage” from a worker in Colorado. These initial perceptions are an indication of the general understanding among all the union members that being in a RTW state means making less of an hourly wage. The union members participating in this study, whether they are from a RTW state or not, expressed their views that wages are lower in states that have the legislation in place.

The first question related to wages was broad and asked the union workers about their general satisfaction regarding their hourly wage. Responses from participants in the Right-to-Work state of Texas consisted of, “They (union members) are dissatisfied with the hourly rate”, “Not satisfied”, “Not paid enough”, “I think it could be higher”, “Do not get paid right wage”, and “Low wage compared to other areas” of the country. It is clear among each of the Texas focus group union workers that their hourly wage was not as high as it should be. The Texas union member’s view of their hourly wage was supported by their Business Manager who stated, “As for the members, I believe they feel we are due a substantial raise. I think they are

dissatisfied with the hourly rate”. It is interesting to note the concern over the wages not being satisfactory to these study participants, but all were satisfied with the benefits, as will be presented later in this analysis.

This initial question on wage satisfaction was general in nature and not intended to explore deeply what constitutes satisfaction among the union members. There are a number of factors that influence an individual’s satisfaction towards their job, career, and compensation, but the question posed to the focus groups sought to obtain their views of their hourly wage. Getting a general understanding of how the participants in the focus groups felt towards their hourly wage, before following up with additional questions, enabled the researcher to gain a core sense among the union workers about the level of satisfaction they have toward their wage. During the interviews and focus group sessions in the three RTW states there was a consensus that their hourly wage rate was lower than it should be but this was particularly evident among the union workers from Texas. As each focus group session continued in Nebraska, Nevada, and Texas, the participants expanded upon their perceptions of their hourly wage, which is included in subsequent questions and sections in this analysis. The pay rate currently being provided results in low satisfaction among the union members.

In contrast to the unsatisfactory view that union workers in RTW states have regarding their hourly wage, the general perspective among union workers in Non-Right-to-Work states is positive. Study participants from the NRTW states of Colorado, Ohio, and Pennsylvania responded to the first question regarding their wages with comments such as a Colorado worker who said “I am happy to have a wage to make my house payment” and [I] “have a very good standard of living”. During the focus group session in Colorado one study participant spent a lot of time emphasizing the cost of living in the state. This particular union member came to the

focus group session prepared, bringing with him materials and information on Colorado's cost of living. The participant stated,

Two years ago a gallon of milk was a \$1.99 and now it is \$2.99...in the 1970's homes were going for \$18,000 to \$22,000 and today that average home will cost somewhere between \$210,000 and \$240,000.

During this portion of the Colorado focus group, it was clear to the researcher that the perception this particular union worker had towards his hourly wage was influenced by the increase in cost of living in the state. Although the cost of living in a state, or particular region of a state where a worker lives, is relative to their hourly wage and how they may perceive their compensation, it is clear to the researcher that this factor is not lost among some union members in Colorado. Even with the increase in cost of living that has taken place in Colorado the focus group participant who raised the issue remains satisfied with their hourly wage rate.

The study participants in Ohio and Pennsylvania had similar positive perceptions toward their wage rate. Two participants from Ohio stated they were, "Happy with their wage", "Good wage", and that "I have never complained about my wages". One younger union member from Pennsylvania linked his thoughts towards his level of pay to those who earned a college degree by stating, "I know a lot of friends of mine that went to four years of school and got jobs and they are not making anywhere near what I am now". Based upon this particular union member's comments about what his college-educated friends were making in comparison to him, his level of satisfaction towards his own hourly wage was influenced by what his peers were making after earning their degree. This worker's perception of his hourly wage was partially based upon not going to college, not having student loan debt, and making more than his college educated friends do at the time of the focus group.

West Virginia union workers expressed similar positive views towards their level of pay as those study participants from Colorado, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, with a member stating, “I feel like we are extremely well compensated for what we do” and another that he is “respectful of the wage level.” With RTW legislation recently passing the state legislature in West Virginia, it is too soon to identify any change in the union workers hourly wage rate. Although perspectives may change over time, the West Virginia study participants are satisfied with their current compensation, but these union members have concerns over what will happen to their wage rate in the future. The United Association members from West Virginia are satisfied with their hourly wage now but their concerns for the future will be presented later in this chapter. The hourly wage in each of these NRTW states are higher than those in the RTW states in this study, and although those differences were not emphasized during the interviews and focus groups, the union workers in NRTW states indicated being more satisfied with their hourly wage than their RTW counterparts.

A follow-up question on wages asked whether workers felt the hourly wage was enough relative to the degree of responsibility the union worker’s job is on the construction site. Participants in RTW states consistently responded to the first focus group question, that their wage level was not satisfactory and lower than it should be. Interestingly, though, to the follow-up question about their wage rate relative to the degree of responsibility their positions involve, concern was more evident. Focus group participants from Nebraska and Nevada expressed that concern with statements such as, “Do I think they (union members) are getting paid at the right wages? Absolutely not”, “Pay does not capture responsibility”, and “Need little more pay to reach responsibility.” Although the statements in these two focus groups reflected concern among the participants that the responsibility put upon them on job sites was not being

adequately reflected in their hourly wage, it was the participants in Texas that really emphasized this issue. At this point of the focus group session, it appeared to the researcher that the participants from Texas hold deeper concerns regarding their level of pay compared to union workers in other RTW states. During this portion of the focus group a clear difference of perception toward wage rates was indicated among the Texas workers over the other study participants, most likely because of an anti-union culture in the state, which is explored later in this analysis.

The Business Manager from Texas commented during his interview that, “The responsibility that is given to the journeymen does not coincide with the money they are making”, while union members stated during the focus group session that, “I think it could be better for the amount of responsibility” and the “Wage does not meet level of responsibility”. With the focus group’s earlier responses to whether participants were satisfied with their wage rate, it was not surprising to hear these comments on the issue of responsibility. The Texas union worker’s views on job site responsibility were supported by their Business Manager, who stated,

They (union members) are really held accountable with labor rate and the hours it should take to do a project. They are told you have this many hours (to complete the project) and that puts a burden a guy.

The time constraints of construction projects, the importance of tasks being completed properly, the liability if tasks are not performed properly, and the cost factor of the facility, equipment, and building supplies all creates a high degree of responsibility on the workers to perform efficiently and without error. This level of responsibility is consistent with large construction projects no matter what state or region of the United States the job is taking place. Based upon what is

required of a mechanical construction worker on a job site, among the union workers in Nebraska, Nevada, and Texas, they do not see their hourly wage at a level equal and respective to the required responsibility.

In contrast to how RTW union workers are not satisfied with their hourly wage, with the degree of job responsibility, NRTW reactions were generally positive and accepting. Study participants in NRTW states felt their hourly wage adequately supported the responsibilities given to them on job sites, as highlighted by the Business Manager from Colorado who stated,

Yes, most of our members will say that the pay level is appropriate because we have journeymen making what they think the journeymen is worth. The typical foreman on almost every job is given a 12% rate increase and usually given a company truck with fuel being covered. So, they look at the total package being very appropriate.

Similar comments were made during the focus group session in Ohio, with one union member stating the “Pay level reaches responsibility”, while another participant spoke on behalf other others in the group by saying; “I think everyone in this room is very satisfied with their wages”, and “I am very satisfied with what I get for what I do”. The initial question on wages reflected how NRTW union workers were satisfied with the hourly rate and their responses to the follow-up question regarding how their wage rate relates to their job responsibility provided confirmation of their satisfaction.

Union workers from Colorado, Ohio, and Pennsylvania perceive that the responsibility when performing work for contractors on construction projects is rewarded enough by their hourly wage. This view was consistently held among the union members with a worker from Pennsylvania making the following comment, “I am satisfied with the wages and benefits” and the Business Manager stating, “Yes, the majority of them [union members] do feel they are

making what they are worth”. Job site tasks of union mechanical construction workers in RTW and NRTW states are similar in how projects are designed, built, and maintained. When building a power plant, manufacturing facility, hospital, high school, or office building, the process of construction and the responsibility that each union worker has to the contractor, is similar no matter what state the project is being performed. As the focus group in Texas was discussing job site responsibility one union member stated, “I think it [hourly wage] could be better for the amount of responsibility” while another worker followed up by stating,

The pay scale is low because I was a manager and a superintendent for years. I paid the guys over scale because that is how I get the ones who wanted to stay and the level of responsibility they got, or that they put into [the project], based upon how much they got over scale.

Taking into consideration how job duties are consistent within the mechanical construction industry, based upon the information gained from the focus groups, the researcher saw a distinct difference in how union workers in the Right-to-Work states of Nebraska, Nevada, and Texas feel their hourly wage is not at a level relative to their responsibilities, as compared to the Non-Right-to-Work states of Colorado, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, which are satisfied.

An additional question on the topic of hourly wage focused on how the union workers perceive their job site performance and how much it contributes to contractor success. This follow-up question sought to understand whether or not the workers perceive their hourly wage being at a level appropriate for how much their contribution results in contractor owner success. During the Business Manager and focus group session held in Texas it quickly became clear that the union members have strong feelings on the success their employers have obtained because of



the worker's job site productivity. On this topic the union Business Manager in Texas made the following comment,

I think they [union members] see several of our contractor owners have big beautiful homes, which I don't know where that money comes from, other than the backs of members and they will say, 'I'll argue that they have other holdings, but I think that they see the contractors are making a lot of profit and they don't see them [union members] getting a fair share of that profit.'

This same notion was expressed during the focus group held in Texas with pointed comments from two participants, one stating, "These guys [union workers] out here doing the sweating while management sitting in office" and another study participant saying,

I know guys who worked at the owner's house and the description of it. I know they [owners] take 10 vacations a year and they are filthy rich millionaires. Just the difference between the guys making them all the money and the guys counting the money.

As this study participant was speaking it did not appear to the researcher that he was being literal about the number of vacations or that all employers are filthy rich. Rather, his comments reflect his perception that owners are doing really well because of the hard work of the union workers efforts.

Union members in the Nevada focus group reiterated similar points as workers in Texas by expressing, "They [union workers] think the contractors should share more of the wealth with them", "You [company owners] are getting rich off of our backs", and "The average member feels that the contractor should share the wealth". Based upon the body language of nodding by the other focus group members there appeared to be a consensus of agreement with this point. This perception among the union members was something the Business Manager in Nevada is

aware of and attempts to address. During the individual interview the Nevada union Business Manager stated,

I think they tend to think, wow, this guy is really doing well, maybe I should be making more money. We work real hard on telling our people this guy has a lot on the line. You get paid no matter what. This guy could lose a lot of money on the job and if he has done well for himself, God bless him.

As the interview continued, he added, “You get a guy working and he will say do you know what he bought, or he went on a trip for two months. I say, so what? That guy is making way too much money. I ask, is he paying you? Are your checks cashing? Is he paying you what he should?” The Business Manager made clear that many of the union members have a sense that the construction firm owners are very successful, as a result of the workers efforts, and that their wage rate should be higher because of what they are contributing to management’s success. The context of how union worker perceptions of their own hourly wage is being directly influenced by the level of success they perceive company owners having is important to the researcher as it involves issues related to employee and employer relations, which will be further analyzed later in this chapter.

Based on data gained from the study participants, union workers in RTW states have a sense that their job site work performance results in management being successful but the hourly wage the employer is paying them is not relative to their contribution. It was evident in the data that the union workers perceive they do the hard work and heavy lifting, while management benefits while working from their office. Study participants from RTW states expressed this perspective to the researcher, but it is important to note that workers have limited knowledge of what the employer and management do in their respective positions that contributes to company

success. Union workers have a better understanding of what takes place on the job site than they do with internal company operations. Although no union member expressed direct knowledge of an employer's financial status, one indication to them of whether or not a company was profitable was how "management takes big vacations" and therefore could "share the wealth". Absent specific financial profit or loss data, the study participants from RTW states perceive that the employers are successful and making money directly because of what they see them purchase. The researcher did not expect company owner personal purchases to have such an influence on how union members perceive their own hourly wage rate.

How union members in the NRTW states of Colorado, Ohio, and Pennsylvania perceive their contribution towards the success of their employers - and how much they are compensated for those efforts - vastly differs from workers in RTW states. Union workers in NRTW generally spoke positively about the success of construction firms relative to their own level of compensation. Union members provided responses, such as a member from Colorado who stated, "The majority of people know that the owner is successful due to them, but they are very content that the contractor is successful because of the product we provide" or from a study participant from Pennsylvania that stated, "I like making them [company owners] money because it makes me money", and one from the transitioned state of West Virginia who commented,

I hope they make lots because greed is a very good motivator. If they make a lot of money on a job they are going to want to do it again and again. We are the ones that make them the money and they are going to use us again and again.

The union members in these NRTW states understand that when union mechanical construction firms successfully complete projects and do so with a profit, they will continue to bid additional projects, and utilize the unionized skilled workforce.

There is an appreciation and understanding that the construction firm's success has much to do with the union workers performance, although it is not perceived as negative from those members in Colorado, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia. Union members in these NRTW states emphasized that they want their employer to make a profit and be successful because they will continue to be in business and build projects using the union trade. If construction firms are successful and profitable it will mean more work, jobs, and employment for the United Association union members, which reflects an understanding and cooperation between labor and management. Based upon participant input from questions related to hourly wages, the study participants in the Non-Right-to-Work states of Colorado, Ohio, and Pennsylvania have generally positive perceptions of their compensation and are satisfied with their level of pay. Union workers from RTW states expressed a deep concern over not being paid enough in relationship to the success of construction firms while study participants from NRTW states were generally pleased with their compensation and accepting of company owner success.

Unionized building trades workers in the mechanical construction industry collectively bargain with management, which is how their hourly wage and benefit contribution levels are determined. The economic package is jointly negotiated between the elected United Association local union Business Manager and representatives and regional local Mechanical Contractors Association chapters that represent the employers. The union negotiates with management for member wages but based upon data from the interview and focus groups, participants from RTW states think their employers are still not compensating them enough by the hourly wage rate

relative to company success. A number of participants indicated that their hourly wage was not high enough as it related to employer profits and that there should be more sharing from construction project success and net profits from operations. With the economic package and collective bargaining agreement being jointly negotiated between labor and management, any aspect of the hourly wage rate and any other compensation item, can be formally considered and negotiated as a group. The workers participating in this study go through the collective bargaining process with signatory employers to negotiate their hourly wage. It is important to emphasize the collective bargaining process because non-union employees who seek wage increases do not have representatives working on their behalf.

It is interesting that workers raised the notion of profit sharing. None of the unions participating in this research have profit sharing programs as part of their compensation; it is not a practice in the mechanical construction industry. Linking union worker compensation to company profits was unexpected. Comments by union members from both Nevada and Texas were similar in the sharing of company profits with statements made such as, “Management doing well and maybe I should make more”, “Management should share wealth”, and “Management does not share enough profits”. The union workers in these RTW states feel they are not being paid enough for what they do for their employers and management is disproportionately making more from the workers contribution to their business than the employer is providing back in the form of a wage. Study participants from NRTW states did not raise the issue of profit sharing, likely because of the higher level of satisfaction they have towards their hourly wage rate.

As study participants from the RTW states continued to express concern that they are not paid proportionately for their work effort, and how their efforts create success and profit for the

employer, it became apparent that there is an underlying labor and management relationship factor influencing these perceptions. These union worker perceptions go beyond the notion of workers feeling they are not being paid enough and more like management is not treating them fairly and equitably. As the union members were expressing themselves and thoughts went to the worker's relationship with management Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory came to mind. When an individual's lower level needs, such as food and water, are met the needs go further up the Maslow pyramid to *ego*. This element of human needs may be influencing the union member's perception of their wages and relationship with their employer. Maslow theorized that as basic human needs are fulfilled a person's ego then must be met which includes self-esteem, recognition, and prestige (Burton, 2012). Some participants discussed how their hourly wage made them feel like management was not treated them as fairly as they should be, and so the *ego* have influenced these perceptions.

Additional data are provided to show how union members perceive their relationship with their employers in the "Employee and Employer Relationship" section of this chapter. The distinction between union worker wage perceptions from United Association members in Nebraska, Nevada, and Texas is clear when compared against those from Colorado, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia. How study participations from RTW and NRTW states perceive their wage level in relationship to their performance making their employers successful was similar and consistent to their respective wage satisfaction and level of responsibility responses to the first two questions in the interviews and focus group sessions. The first interview question about wage satisfaction indicated differences between those union workers in RTW states and those in NRTW states. The follow-up questions on wage levels, job responsibility, and contribution to employer success confirmed and solidified the varying

perceptions held among those workers in Nebraska, Nevada, and Texas and those members in Colorado, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia.

Union worker compensation packages consist of an hourly wage and benefits. Benefits include both healthcare coverage and pension programs. When asked about the healthcare plan and pension benefits provided by their employers through the collective bargaining agreement, there was no distinct difference between the perceptions from those United Association union members in RTW and NRTW states. Perceptions about their benefits, that were provided during the individual Business Manager interviews and focus group sessions, from both RTW and NRTW states, were all similar in that the union workers felt the benefit levels were satisfactory. The Business Manager from Pennsylvania made positive statements about benefits and how union member perceptions of them were consistently positive as well. He stated that he feels union members,

Realize it is a very, very rich healthcare plan and I believe, this might be a stretch, but I'm going to say 100% of them realize it is a good pension program. You hear the guys retiring now where they are making more in retirement than they were working, so I think people realize they have a good pension plan.

Similar comments were made by the Business Manager in Colorado who stated, “[I’m] very satisfied [with the benefits] and I would say all of my members are very satisfied” with the Business Manager from Ohio commenting, “I would say the majority of the members are satisfied with the pension”. Some additional perceptions gained during the focus group sessions were members in Nebraska who said they are, “satisfied with the level of coverage”, “Everybody knows they have a good plan”, and “The health & welfare is a good plan”, while during the Nevada session the union members clearly felt satisfied with their benefits based on comments

like, “I have never heard anyone complain about their pension”, “Satisfied with pension benefit”, and “I think they are very satisfied and very proud”. During the focus group sessions, in both RTW and NRTW states, it quickly became apparent that the union members were not just satisfied with the benefits and healthcare coverage, but particularly proud of them and pleased with the pension programs.

In the heavy construction industry the job site tasks the union workers perform on a daily basis take a toll on their bodies and ability to retire with dignity creates a source of pride among the United Association members. Unlike perceptions regarding their wage rate, union workers in RTW states viewed the benefit portion of their economic package favorably, similar to what was expressed among the NRTW union members. Based upon the one-on-one interviews with the union Business Managers and focus group sessions with the union workers in all seven states, there is no clear distinction between union member perceptions of their healthcare and pension benefits based up their state’s Right-to-Work status.

Union worker compensation consists of both wages and benefits, based upon the focus group sessions; there was a distinction between how participants in both RTW and NRTW states perceived their hourly wage, but not in how they perceived their healthcare and pension benefits. Study participants in all seven states in this study expressed satisfaction and pride in the level of benefits they receive. The RTW status of a state did not appear to influence the perceptions the union workers had toward their benefits. All the UA members were pleased with their benefits with no direct expression of dissatisfaction similar to that of the hourly wage rate. A union member from Texas stated that may provide some insight as to why perceptions of benefits are not the same as wages as he stated, “People just can’t look past their paycheck. These guys can’t look past their paycheck”. A participant from Nevada commented that, “The average rank and



file member has an overly simplified idea of what it takes to have insurance” while a worker from Colorado feels that the union members “don’t take the time to pay attention to whatever they are getting and they don’t understand the value of the fringe benefits they are receiving”. In regards to union members understanding of their benefits, the Business Manager from Ohio stated that the workers were, “very trusting and expect that you [Business Manager] are taking care of these things [benefits]. They don’t worry about it because it is being taken care of”. Additional research on the difference in perception towards hourly wage and benefits is warranted, but based on the focus group input, the researcher concludes with this limited information, that the take home pay is more directly seen, understood, and utilized in the union workers daily lives. Based on input from Business Managers, the union members do not put much thought or time into understanding what is involved with their healthcare and pension programs, as compared to their hourly wage, because their elected union representatives are responsible for managing the benefit programs. This may be a reason why union members appear to be genuinely satisfied with their benefits no matter whether they reside and work in a RTW or NRTW state.

### **Communication/Feedback: Employee and Employer Relationship**

Data at this point in the analysis have focused on union member perceptions towards their wages and benefits. The next series of questions in the one-on-one Business Manager interviews and union member focus group sessions sought to gain input and perspectives regarding their work environment and relationship with their employers. The perceptions regarding the work environment and relationship workers have with their employers focus primarily on job site safety, communication, and how the union members receive feedback on their performance from construction firms. The study participants from both the RTW and NRTW states, and the Right-

to-Work transitioned state of West Virginia all provided similar responses to the question of employer provided feedback on their job performance.

Input from UA union members from the seven states in this study consistently indicated that there was limited or no direct communication or feedback from employers regarding worker job site performance. Responses provided by the study participants include the following from the Texas union Business Manager,

They [union members] don't feel that they get near enough. They feel like the paycheck is what they get [for feedback and] if I don't hear anything I am doing a good job, but if I screw something up, I will be the first to hear about it. In your case no news is good news.

The Business Manager from Nebraska made similar points with the following input,

I think if you are going to inform them at all it is because they are doing something incorrectly. I don't think there is a lot of positive reinforcement, but I think in general there is a lack of communication by everybody.

During the focus group session in Nebraska a union member stated,

One way it is given is by the number of hours that you work. If you are doing a really good job you may be asked to work extra hours on a shut down or on a weekend. That plays into between the lines, but you have to figure it out yourself, you must be doing something right.

Additional perspectives gained from the Nebraska union members include, "If they don't like what you are doing, instead of telling you, they will just lay you off", and, "If you are still working there, and if they have been there for any amount of time, obviously they are making the contractor money. So, in that way, not verbal, just longevity." After conducting the interviews

and focus groups, in the RTW states of Nebraska, Nevada, and Texas, it is clear that there is not a great deal of direct feedback given to union members regarding their job performance by the employers. The workers accept their paychecks and amount of time being employed by the construction firm as feedback on their performance. The Business Managers and union members in the RTW states indicated that the main form of job site performance feedback is by means of receiving a paycheck, length of time working for the contractor, or hearing from them only when something is not going well.

The type of performance feedback received in the NRTW states of Colorado, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and transitioned state of West Virginia, is similar to what the union worker input provided by the study participants in the RTW states. One of the union members in Ohio stated,

Unfortunately, you always hear the bad, hey you know we have to pick it up or this isn't right. You hear more of that than you do of the hey great job, you did a wonderful job, job is on time and under budget, or we knocked it out of the park, but you definitely hear more of the bad than the good.

Another focus group member in Ohio indicated that there was "no direct feedback", with the Business Manager emphasizing that union members

might get some feedback from management, probably more on the sense of, we are running behind in hours on this section of the project. You know we need to pick that up a little bit..... I don't think management comes back to often and says, hey, you did a great job here.

Additional comments by union members regarding performance feedback include the following from workers: "Keeping a job is feedback" (participant in the Pennsylvania focus group), or "A paycheck is feedback" (worker in Colorado). As this input was provided by the participants

what became particularly meaningful is the significance of how a paycheck and time frame working for a contractor became accepted as the main source of employer provided feedback. The providing of a paycheck, benefits, and continued work, is a core element of the employee and employer relationship. It became apparent that the tangible aspects of employment, that being compensation and length of employment, was the main means of performance feedback provided by the employer.

Based on statements by participants from the seven states in this study, the RTW status of a state did not appear to influence union workers' perceptions of how they received feedback or appreciation from their employers. The members' experiences indicate that there is no formal performance evaluation process within the mechanical construction industry and their only feedback is by receiving a paycheck or the length of employment with the construction firms. If a UA member has worked for a contractor for an extended period of time they perceive that as positive feedback and if a union member gets laid off from a construction project before others, they perceive it as feedback that their performance is not as productive as others and they accept it as negative feedback. Additional research could explore the reason why limited communication and performance feedback is provided to the union workers by their construction firm employers. Researcher thoughts about the limited direct performance feedback received from company owners include the fact that United Association Plumbers and Pipefitters union members are skilled trade personnel, trained as a trade apprentice, and employed out of the hiring hall. Construction firms understand, as union signatory contractors, they are being provided highly skilled building trades personnel when contacting the union hall to hire the workers for a construction project. The construction firms may not see a reason to provide

performance feedback because of hiring these highly skilled trade personnel from the union hiring hall.

### **Safety: Work Environment and Job Site**

The working conditions and job site environment in the mechanical construction industry involves, but is not limited to, being outside in inclement weather, such as extreme heat and cold, the use of heavy equipment, and working from heights. Construction personnel often need to work both in ditches and heights, requiring union workers and construction firms to be safety conscious. This involves the following of stipulated safety procedures and guidelines stated in project specifications and regulations issued by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). Study participants throughout each of the seven individual Business Manager interviews and focus group sessions consistently emphasized feeling safe while on the job and having a good work environment on construction sites. United Association Plumbers and Pipefitters union members from both RTW and NRTW states expressed feeling safe on job sites and that signatory mechanical contractors provide a safe work environment. One difference among study participants regarding safety was working on job sites where mechanical contractors are a sub-contractor to a general construction firm. Study participants from RTW states, particularly Texas, stated that when working on construction projects where a general contractor, from a RTW state, was overseeing the project, there was limited focus on safety.

During the one-on-one interviews, with the elected Business Managers, each indicated to their belief that the union members were safe and that mechanical construction firms were doing everything possible to ensure the best working environment for projects to be performed and completed accident free. It became evident that each Business Manager felt the mechanical construction firms take the safety of the workers seriously. This was evident with the Business

Manager in Colorado who stated, “I would say the typical member would say their working conditions and environment are extremely acceptable,” which was also reiterated by the Pennsylvania Business Manager who said, “All of our contractors do take care of the guys and make the conditions right for them and my experience has been most companies have a good work environment”. The Business Managers from Texas and Nevada made similar points with each respectively stating, “I think most feel safe” and “Contractors do everything they can to make sure the guys are safe, I really believe that”. Additional input on job site safety consisted of, “I think most of our members are pretty happy as far as conditions on the job” as indicated by the Ohio Business Manager. The researcher found a perspective expressed by the Business Manager from Colorado, as to a reason why the job sites are safe, to be particularly interesting as he mentioned, “The union and the collective bargaining agreement has built the quality of work environment and the quality of the work environment would drop without the collective bargaining agreement”. With the collective bargaining agreement being jointly negotiated between the construction firms and union representatives the issue and concern of making job sites as safe as possible is equally important to both labor and management. The Colorado Business Manager felt that labor and management coming together, during the collective bargaining process, results in a mutually agreed upon acceptance of the importance of job site safety and the implementation of proper construction project procedures and practices. The labor and management jointly negotiated collective bargaining agreement helps to ensure the work environment is as safe as possible for both the workers and the employer.

Union members in each of the states participating in this study generally indicated feeling safe on the job and that their employers were doing everything possible to create that environment for them. A comment made by a union member in Nebraska highlighted this point;

“The work environment they [mechanical contractors] provide us with the safety and tools to do the job and good working conditions”. Another participant in that same focus group reiterated, “The site itself [is safe] because they [the contractors] are going over and above what OSHA would need”. Similarly, a union member in Ohio felt, “Most of our members are pretty happy as far as conditions on the job”, and a participant in Nevada indicated, “Contractors are taking a more proactive approach by providing all the safety equipment and safety training. I think they do a better job of that now than in the past”. Additional input from the focus groups in Nevada and Texas were consistent with one another with study participant comments including, “Never felt unsafe”, “Safety first by contractors”, and “Union all safe”. All of the study participants from the Non-Right-to-Work states of Colorado, Ohio, and Pennsylvania expressed satisfaction with their work environment and no issues of concern regarding the safety of construction job sites. A union worker from Colorado said, “I would say the typical member would say their working conditions and environment are extremely acceptable”. Based upon the comments made during the focus groups the researcher was left with the sentiment that the union members truly feel safe while on the construction sites and that their employers were providing them with the best working environment possible.

Although the vast majority of study participants did not express any issues over their construction site work environment or safety, a few union members in Right-to-Work states indicated some concern. Concerns over safety that were brought out during focus group sessions tended to involve general contractors who oversee the entire construction project where the mechanical contractor is a sub-contractor. A union member from Texas stated,

The environment could be better because of the decay in the way the general contractors treat their job sites now. I think the environment needs vast improvement. It is getting worse.

The type of projects being referenced here involve a general contractor who oversees the job and has the mechanical contractor perform as a subcontractor to them. The union members still work for the mechanical construction firm but have the general contractor providing oversight and direct involvement. Another union member from Nebraska was not fully comfortable saying he was “fairly satisfied” with the work environment and that much of the job site “doesn’t fall back on the [mechanical] contractors, is fair to say, but to the general contractors who are running the job”. Although the consensus of the workers from Nebraska, Nevada, and Texas were generally positive and United Association members were overwhelmingly satisfied with their work environment and level of safety, there were some that expressed areas for improvement that focused primarily on how the general contractor manage the construction project and job site.

There were a few comments regarding the safety practices of non-union construction firms located in the southern parts of the country who traveled to perform projects in the jurisdiction of the NRTW states. Comments from participants from Colorado include, “Not safe in the South” and one union member from West Virginia stated, “It is a reality you have these companies coming up from the south and they are not so prevalent on the union stronghold and in the union way”. In context, the non-union construction firms located in the southern region of the United States are from Right-to-Work states that have less employer required regulations. When southern-owned and operated non-union general construction firms secure projects in other regions of the country, union workers see less focus on job site safety and concerns over the work environment rise. In this instance the general contractor has the sole contract with the



project owner to perform the work. The general contractor then seeks bids by sub-contractors, such as the mechanical trade, where they can then use union or non-union companies to perform work. The perception among some of the union members is these non-union general contractors from the south do not provide the same level of job site safety as the local mechanical construction firms do for their workers. Although these concerns were stated by a number of study participants, the vast majority of responses provided by the UA members from the seven states represented in this study, expressed their work environment is generally safe and productive. This is reflective of the union building trade members being better trained on job site safety procedures and being more mindful of safety than non-union workers who do not receive the same level of safety training.

When asked whether they were better or worse off because of their state's Right-to-Work status study participants from the Non-Right-to-Work states of Colorado, Ohio, and Pennsylvania all perceived themselves as better off because of their state being NRTW. Although many emphasized how they make a higher hourly wage than their union member counterparts in RTW states, many of the union members focused on how their job sites and work environment were safer because of being in a NRTW state. Comments supporting this notion were made during the Colorado focus group session as one union member spoke strongly on this issue by saying,

Safety is a big thing. When you go to a Right-to-Work state, like Arizona, you have about half of the job site that is non-union and half is union. You don't know who they are going to pair you up with. They can pair you up with a guy who just came from flipping burgers and don't know a thing about our trade to work with you. All standards are lower.

UA union members must complete a five-year apprenticeship training program in order to obtain their journeymen status. Throughout this five-year training program the workers are trained on all aspects of the trade and gain the skills needed to perform their job safely and productively. Non-union workers do not receive this level of training and it is this aspect of the industry and construction site that the study participant in Colorado was referencing as a reason for being unsafe. A focus group participant from Ohio emphasized a similar point when stating, “I would definitely say they [union members] know enough about Right-to-Work to know the standards are lower. They know that.” Another participant during the focus group in Colorado further highlighted that they are, “Better off and more safety on job site”, and “Right-to-Work states are less safe on job sites”. Although much attention has been given toward the wage difference between workers in RTW states, as compared to those in NRTW states, it is clear that many of the United Association union members focused a great deal on the level of safety on the construction sites. The Business Manager from Pennsylvania emphasized many of the union members thoughts regarding safety on the job site and the influence of RTW by stating, “Let’s face it accidents on jobs in Non-Right-to-Work states are much higher than in Right-to-Work states. Accidents are higher in Right-to-Work states than they are in Non-Right-to-Work states”. The study participant did not provide information to support this claim but it is an impression he has that influences his perception.

The general consensus among the union members is their projects are much safer than those that have non-union construction firms on site, which was evident during the focus group sessions as participants highlighted the larger number of non-union employers located in RTW states. A point further reiterated by study participants is that when union construction firms are performing projects that have non-union companies on site this has a direct impact on the union

workers. A union worker in Colorado said that, “Job sites in Right-to-Work states will have lowered skilled workers making less and making job sites less safe for unions”. Studies have shown that RTW states have lower union density than NRTW states and greater percentage of the state’s workforce is not represented by a union. The correlation of more non-union construction firms performing projects in RTW states and concern over safety was not lost among the United Association members participating in this study. Union members emphasized that job sites in RTW states had a higher level of non-union workers on construction projects creating an unsafe work environment. The participants perceive a direct link between the increased percentage of non-union workers on job sites in Right-to-Work states results in the overall work environment being less safe.

Throughout the Business Manager interviews and union member focus group sessions, a number of references were made about contractors from southern states that perform projects in the states where the study participants work and reside. States located in the southern region of the United States, such as Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Florida are all Right-to-Work states. The context and concern for which the participants in this study reference is when working for general contractors located in those southern states that are performing projects in their home state jurisdiction. Union members from both RTW and NRTW states indicated that when working on construction sites where non-union general contractors from southern RTW states were overseeing the project there was less focus on safety practices. This concern was emphasized by the Business Manager from West Virginia when he stated, “It is a reality that you have these companies coming up from the south and they are not so prevalent in the union stronghold, in the union way, and safety for that matter”.

Many of the study participants' experience is that the southern states' general contractors are not as safety conscious as the local signatory mechanical contractors. The perception among the union members is that they experience lower concern for the workers by the non-union southern construction firms, less feedback and communication, and less focus on maintaining a purely safe work environment.

**Sentiment: Anti-Union**

The Right-to-Work status of a state is a political action as it is legislation that is enacted by government representatives and passed into law. From a political perspective RTW is viewed as anti-union and pro-business. It is perceived as anti-union because of how the regulations make it difficult for unions to gain members and receive union dues. With RTW states having lower hourly wage rates than NRTW states, it is perceived by union members as pro-business legislation. The increase of non-union employers and the lowering of membership density among unions located in RTW states reflect a long term negative impact of this law as it relates to organized labor. Public sentiment toward unions and the political environment and discourse, along with pro-business influence, create a state's overall atmosphere related to RTW. This sentiment was not lost among the participants in this study, particularly those union members in the states of Nebraska, Nevada, Texas, and West Virginia. A consistent response from study participants from RTW states, regarding their knowledge about the legislation, is that it results in lower wages being paid by employers. Union members did not detail specific regulations or statutes within the legislation, or what the written law included, but emphasized that it had been enacted and in place for as long as they remember. Although many study participants did not reference actual RTW regulations they did in fact indicate their belief that it was negative toward unions.

Based upon comments made by study participants throughout this research it is the perception among the union members that RTW is anti-union and intentionally enacted and maintained to harm organized labor. With RTW being passed into law in Nebraska in 1947, Nevada in 1952, and Texas in 1993, the vast majority of participants in this study have worked their careers with the legislation being in place. Union members from Texas referenced RTW in their state as, “just part of the culture” or that it has “been around so long”, while the union Business Manager stated, that union members have always had it so our guys just live with it and like I tell you, Right-to-Work for me means Right-to-Work for less, but our guys know nothing, because it is just part of the culture here.” He added, “It is never going to change in Texas. You look around at it going all over the nation, they are falling every year. Somebody is bringing legislation that passes”. The union members in these states have never known anything different because the law has been in place throughout their professional life. During the interview with the Texas Business Manager it became evident that having RTW in place for a long period of time it has become part of the overall work environment for their union and the members.

Issues related to their work environment and how their union, as an organization, has been operating under RTW regulations for so long, has led members and union leaders becoming accustomed to it. Additional input among participants stated that being a union member in a RTW state, “Is just something we grew up with, it is what it is for us”, as mentioned by a worker in Nebraska, with a member from Nevada stating, “I think most of the people we work with today were raised in Nevada and don’t know any different. This is how we were raised.” Another participant in the same focus group reiterated that it is “just another day” and most members “don’t know any different, always been this way”. It was interesting how a number of participants were mindful of becoming accustomed to aspects of their work environment that

were negative and how over time it becomes a just a normal part of their daily routine. The union Business Manager in Nebraska confirmed this point by emphasizing,

I don't know a lot of people in Wisconsin but I was talking to a Business Manager up there and he said, "Man how do you deal with this shit"? I deal with it every day of my life, it is like second nature. When it is this way today and this way the next day, there is a lot of culture shock going on. You learn what you have to do to work with it, but the average guy has no idea.

As a Business Manager of a local union in a Right-to-Work state it was clear to the union representative from Nebraska that the Business Manager from Wisconsin was concerned about the changes he would need to make as his state transitioned to RTW. The "shit" the Business Manager referenced in his discussion with the Nebraska Business Manager was likely the potential loss in union membership, drop in union dues, and general anti-union attitudes taking place in his state. A number of participants emphasized in their responses that RTW is perceived as anti-union and that they have experienced that sentiment both in their personal and professional life. One focus group participant from the state of Texas stated that when speaking with others, after indicating that he is a union worker in the mechanical construction industry, he concluded that,

People my age don't understand why I'm union because they are under informed and under educated. They think it is ridiculous that I pay X amount of dollars a month in dues to work. That is how they look at it, the Right-to-Work union is a weird thing around here realistically.

Another union member stated during that same focus group that, "When I tell people I am in a union, what I do, [they respond that they] 'didn't know we had unions in Texas', or statement

number two is, ‘You’re in a union?’”. The anti-union perception within RTW states was also expressed by a member from Nevada with participants pointing out, “The way I understand the legislation is Right-to-Work is a legalized step with intent to break the unions” with another focus group member adding,

I think most of the people we work with today were raised in Nevada don’t know any different. They haven’t worked in a Non-Right-to-Work state to see the pros and cons and benefits of not being Right-to-Work. All we know, this is how we was raised.

The perspective of the union members in Nevada and Texas is that many individuals in their state do not think there are unions in their state, because of it being RTW for so long, and the anti-union environment and pro-business work atmosphere that exists.

The perceived anti-union culture held in some Right-to-Work states was reiterated by one study participant who detailed an encounter he had with an individual who expressed interest in being a welder. During the focus group session in Texas a union member openly discussed an instance where he met a young adult who wanted to enter the welding trade and be a part of the mechanical construction industry. He narrated,

Was talking to a kid this week and he said he wanted to be a welder. I was telling him we have welding programs and I said it was a union school. As soon as I said union he said “my dad said no way. I would rather pay \$25,000, my dad would, than to be a union member”.

Having a father who would rather pay a great deal of money for his child to learn welding skills, instead of entering a five-year apprenticeship training program, simply because they do not want to see their child become a union member, is a reflection of how deep rooted anti-union sentiment is in certain parts of the country. Another participant in the Texas focus group

followed up that story by saying, “We have a teacher union for Dallas County but most of these little districts are typically Republican run, very conservative. If a guidance counselor recommended unions [to students] that would probably mean their job”.

When this attitude is passed down from generation to generation it solidifies the overall culture created by the society of the state’s anti-union views.

The union member participants who reside and work in Non-Right-to-Work states did not emphasize specifics of the law but had similar perceptions as the workers in RTW states in regards to the legislation being anti-union. The sense among the union members in Colorado, Ohio, and Pennsylvania is that RTW is not beneficial to unions; however their comments focused mainly on how the law lowers the hourly rate of the working person. Absent referencing specifics of the law union members from Ohio stated that, “I just think they [union members] know it is bad but they don’t know anything about it” with a follow-up comment by another participant in the Ohio focus group,

Based off the research that I have done it [RTW] doesn’t cause more people to work. It doesn’t lower the unemployment rate. These are studies based off of states that went Right-to-Work over the last year. Wages are on average 16% lower and the unemployment rate is not lower, so I don’t understand how that could make the situation better”.

This particular focus group participant came to the session prepared and conducted some research on the topic. It was difficult to determine the accuracy of this union member’s information, during the focus group session, but interesting that he spent time looking into the subject matter. As the researcher it was good to see a study participant come prepared to the focus group session but the body language among the other union members indicated slight



annoyance toward the amount of time this individual consumed the session. During the various focus group sessions it became clear that some union members were more aware of RTW matters and how their state's legislative status impacted their work environment. Although not a focus of the study, based upon input from participants, some unions provide members information pertaining to RTW and other legislative matters while others have limited communication unless the issue is being actively considered by state officials.

During the focus group session in Pennsylvania, similar to comments made in Ohio, many workers understand enough about RTW to form the perception that it is "Right-to-Work for less" and that "Wages are lower because of the law being in place". During this discussion one Pennsylvania union member referenced that RTW is not good for organized labor but specifically emphasized that this is particularly the case in southern states. The member stated that it is "tougher to be in a union, especially in the South". This was another reference made to the work environment in the southern region of the country where RTW has been in place for decades and how it has created an anti-union work atmosphere. The union workers in the states of Colorado, Ohio, and Pennsylvania do not work under Right-to-Work regulations but they still have clear perceptions that the legislation is negative towards unions.

#### **Adapt: Implication of Right-to-Work**

Input provided by union Business Managers from the Right-to-Work states of Nebraska, Nevada, and Texas addressed some of the key implications of having the law in place. As an elected representative of the union it is the Business Manager's responsibility to operate the union as professionally and efficiently as possible. Being a Business Manager in a RTW state requires the officials to adapt some of their operational practices that are not needed to be implemented by Business Managers in NRTW states. To the degree that each of the states in this

study have had RTW in place for decades union Business Managers indicated in order to manage their organization they have “Learned how to work with it” and adapt as mentioned by the Business Manager from Nebraska. He added,

It would be like if you were born without a thumb and you never had it, so you don’t know, you learn to work around whatever that is. So being around in Nebraska so long, oh this sucks, they are making us do this, and they are making us do that. This is what it is, so nobody gives it a second thought, so I think that works in my favor.

It was clear that the point the Business Manager was making here was having RTW in place for so long, the impact of the legislation becomes part of the overall work environment. The law becomes a natural factor of how the union operates and how the workers go about their normal day. Overtime the effect that RTW has on the union and their industry becomes accepted and the need to adapt becomes second nature. His point was, as the Business Manager is elected to run the union, there is need to adjust how the union operates as a result of the RTW regulations being put into place and the union members ultimately begin to accept that reality.

Business Managers are elected officials empowered by the union members to manage the operations of the union. Union growth in membership and industry market share are two core responsibilities of Business Managers. United Association Business Managers in RTW states indicated the increased difficulty of maintaining union membership as a result of their state’s RTW status. During Business Manager interviews in Nebraska and Texas, comments were made about added difficulty in maintaining union membership in a RTW state, such as, “Union percentage drops in Right-to-Work states” and that “Right-to-Work loses union density”. The anti-union sentiment that is part of the work environment in RTW states makes it more difficult to attract new members. Business Managers indicated a need for more outreach and information

sharing regarding the benefits of being a union member in order to get potential new union building trade workers interested in joining the union.

It became clear that a number of study participants formed their perceptions of RTW and the influence of the legislation from traveling to and working in various states outside of their home jurisdiction. Communicating with Business Managers and fellow union members from other states helped form a number of study participant perceptions of RTW. As a United Association journey trade person union members are able to travel to any other UA union jurisdiction to work on construction projects as the demand for labor warrants. One union member from Colorado, who traveled outside of their state, mentioned that he “worked in Wyoming and they were going through this [RTW enactment] and when Wyoming went to Right-to-Work they went from a 2,200 member local to about 400-500 now”. The long-term impact of RTW is understood among the United Association members, both those in RTW states and those in NRTW. There is a distinct perception that maintaining union membership size is much more difficult being in a RTW state than NRTW and unions need to adapt.

Unions are operated by the funds they receive from union dues that are paid by their members through wage payroll deductions. In RTW states the loss of union density means a drop in the amount of union dues being contributed by members in order to run the organization. Sustaining enough membership and dues income to operate the union is a responsibility of the Business Manager. This concern is long-term and an added difficulty of being a Business Manager in a RTW state. An operational adjustment, highlighted by the union in Nebraska, dealt with how they bring new members into the union. When recruiting and organizing new union members, because of RTW and stipulations related to union dues, the local union Business Manager in Nebraska said he has

Taken a different approach and work within the Right-to-Work umbrella. We put on the application that they [new member] work with the guys, it is kind of their probationary period, and then once they are everything we think they are, we then bring them in.

Workers in RTW states are not required to pay union dues, as a condition of employment, so this Nebraska local union emphasizes the need to make sure any new recruit into the union and the mechanical construction trade needs to know that they really want to be in the industry and be a part of the union. As a result, this particular union implemented the “probationary applicant” step in the organizing process so that they can give the individual time to work in the industry and learn what the union is about before the Business Manager makes them a full union member. If the probationary worker is in the industry for a period of time and likes the union environment they may be less likely to have concerns about paying union dues. The intention of this program is to help ensure that the new applicant becomes familiar with the union, how they operate, and the industry before becoming a full union member. After a period of time being a probationary applicant and the individual formally agrees to become a union member it is an indication to the Business Manager that the individual wants to be a part of the union. It has resulted in union members paying their union dues although being in a RTW state.

Issues related to operating a union in a Right-to-Work state were not lost among the Business Managers and union members in the states of Colorado, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. In Ohio a union member came well prepared to the focus group session. He referenced an article he read by stating,

I read in Wisconsin and Michigan their union membership has fallen off dramatically. In Wisconsin alone it went from 11.7% to 8.3%. In Right-to-Work, as union density drops, you lose your leverage. You lose your voice, your influence, in society.

A similar concern was expressed by the Business Manager in Pennsylvania by emphasizing that “It makes it a lot tougher to be in the union. Of course, there are still unions in Right-to-Work states in the south, but we still have better unions here.” The implication of a state being RTW is clearly on the minds of the Business Managers and union members who currently work and reside in NRTW states. Even among the long established NRTW states of Colorado, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, the union members participating in this study expressed concern for the future if their state’s legislature would in fact enact it into law. In regards to concern over RTW in the future, the Business Manager in Ohio stated, “I don’t see it at least in the immediate future being a problem but ultimately it will at some point down the road. If we had Right-to-Work I would say our local (membership) would probably be in half”.

The perceived long-term negative implication of having RTW legislation enacted in a state has an impact on how union members feel about working in their own particular state. Union members who work in NRTW states have a deep perception that their fellow UA workers in RTW states make a lower hourly wage than they do. The study participants in the states of Colorado, Ohio, and Pennsylvania expressed an appreciation for working in their respective states because of their RTW status resulting in a higher wage rate. Comments supporting this notion consisted of the Ohio Business Manager stating, “Not being a Right-to-Work state there is a perception that they [union workers] are paid higher”. Individual union members from Colorado reiterated this point by saying, “Without a doubt, our wages are higher than they would be if we were Right-to-Work”, while another focus group member followed up that comment by stating,

You can look at Utah, and they were about even with us, and when they got voted in Right-to-Work, their wage is not ours. We are \$31 an hour and they are at \$27. What does that tell you?

Dollar figures referenced by participants were not able to be verified during the focus groups and interviews, but still reflect the workers perceptions. Similar concerns were expressed by the Business Manager from Pennsylvania, who stated,

We can look at the southern states and a lot of their rates are \$28, now \$25 an hour, and you go up into the northeast, where it is mostly Non-Right-to-Work, and the wage rates are much higher, \$60 and \$70 bucks. It is a big difference.

Based on the consistent responses from union members from NRTW states, they partially attribute their state's RTW status as a factor towards the hourly wage rate they have as compared to those union workers in the mechanical construction industry that have lower hourly wages in RTW states. A clear perception among union workers in the states of Colorado, Ohio, and Pennsylvania is that their hourly wage and union density is high because of their NRTW status.

### **Appreciation: Being a Union Member in a Right-to-Work State**

Study participants were asked whether they perceive themselves as better or worse off being a union member because of their states own Right-to-Work status. With this question the researcher was seeking to better understand how each union member perceive themselves as a union member based upon the RTW status of their state. Those members in the Right-to-Work states of Nebraska, Nevada, and Texas all indicated they see themselves as worse off because of having the legislation in place. As indicated in the responses regarding wages the study participants from these states clearly perceive their wages as lower than they otherwise would be if their state was not RTW. The lower hourly wage in RTW states is also attributed to the

increase level of non-union competition that drives down the industry wage, as indicated by the Texas Business Manager, who stated, “I think that is what they [union members] think, that the non-union [hourly wage] is so much lower than we are, that’s why”. As union density is lower in RTW states and non-union competition increases, it is the view of the Business Manager in Texas that this has a lot to do with the lowering of the overall industry’s hourly wage. Having a higher percentage of non-union workers within the mechanical construction industry in a RTW state increases pressure to keep the union’s hourly wage rate lower in order to compete.

When asked about their work environment a number of participants indicated areas for improvement, especially in regards to safety. As for being worse off it was thought mostly in regards to the hourly wage rate and safety, as presented in an earlier section in this finding chapter. The worse off notion was consistently referenced by the RTW Business Managers and union member focus group participants. A statement made by the Business Manager in Texas summarized it well by his following response,

We have a guy at my job from California, which is not a Right-to-Work state, and the unions are stronger there and he talks about you going on a job and every single person there is union. Every single trade, everyone. Their wages are higher, their standard of living is better, safety, and everything. You come to Texas and we have to fight for a nickel because those larger nonunion companies set the bar.

This Business Manager perceives a clear distinction for his union membership being from the RTW state of Texas compared to those United Association members from NRTW states that have higher wages and better overall standards. As the Texas BM made this point during the interview it did not appear to the researcher that he felt resentment or inequities for being from a RTW state. The BM comment focused more on how his state’s RTW status brought additional

issues that he and his membership need to contend with that United Association unions located in NRTW states do not.

Throughout the focus group sessions in Nebraska, Nevada, and Texas participants reiterated that many union members “don’t know the difference” of being in a RTW state and “they have become accustomed to their work environment”. A participant in Nebraska expanded upon this notion by stating “many of the workers may not know the full impact of RTW, because they have accepted RTW as second nature” and it has become the “everyday life of a union”. It became clear that the longer the law has been in place, and the workers have been in a Right-to-Work state, union members become accustomed to the work environment in their state. RTW has become part of a state’s culture and that the union tries to work with RTW regulations and learned to adapt accordingly. This general understanding and acceptance of how their workplace and industry has been impacted by their state being Right-to-Work is now just part of being a union member. The RTW status of the states of Nebraska, Nevada, and Texas have been in place for decades, the impact the legislation has had on the unions and the workplace has become a part of the mechanical construction industry for so long that it has become engrained in the work environment of each state.

Many study participants in RTW states indicated the legislation has had a negative impact on them as union members and workers but there was also an interesting perspective that came out of the focus group sessions. There was expressed appreciation among a number of the study participants about being a union member in a RTW state. Although the workers felt that being in a RTW state did not benefit them or the union there was a realization that it meant a lot for them to still have that opportunity to be in a union. The union workers from the states of Nebraska, Nevada, and Texas consistently emphasized the influence that the RTW status of their



state has on their wages and working conditions, but they also indicated an appreciation for being a union member in a RTW state. There is an understanding among these union members of the difficulty of unions being maintained in RTW states while also being appreciative of being a union member and receiving the wages, benefits, and representation that they do. This understanding and appreciation is indicated and reflected in the following statement from the Texas Business Manager, “I think they are worse off as far as Right-to-Work status but better off still being a union member” and a similar point made by the Business Manager from Nevada who stated,

I think they [union members] appreciate the fact that they have representation and they are involved in collective bargaining. They reap the benefit of good wages and benefits.

I think they realize that.

Although the union members understand the negative influence RTW legislation has on their labor organization, the overall context of being a union trade that is located in a RTW state has created a sense of pride. This is an unexpected result to the researcher of how the RTW status of Nebraska, Nevada, and Texas has built among some of the study participants an added degree of pride for being a union member.

### **Concern: For the Future**

With Right-to-Work being a law that is voted on and enacted by a state’s legislature, there is the possibility that any state in the United States, which currently does not have RTW in place, could in the future. As a legislative and political process RTW can be proposed by any state legislature for consideration and passage. The state of West Virginia was Non-Right-to-Work until their legislature passed the law and became Right-to-Work in early 2017. The United Association of Plumbers and Pipefitters union members from West Virginia participating in this

study expressed concern over how becoming RTW is going to change their wages, benefits, and working conditions. During his one-on-one interview, the West Virginia union Business Manager stated that many of the union members have concerns, now that the state has passed RTW legislation, that “Their wages are going to drop. That would be their first perception”. He further expressed concern for the future about their benefits by commenting,

I think the benefits will go before the wage would start dropping. Just sitting where we sit, take the health & welfare for example, where are you going to get the money to put in the health & welfare? They are going to take it off your wage if there is nowhere else to take it. If the market can't sustain that money you probably have to take money off their hourly wage and put it into the health and welfare.

The Business Manager's concern was made clear to the researcher that if the signatory mechanical contractors begin to lose market share, to non-union construction firms, because of the overall economic package, maintaining their benefits may require allocating money from the wage instead of just increasing the benefit contribution rates. The local collective bargaining agreement has in place the negotiated compensation package, which includes an hourly wage rate and the set hourly healthcare and pension benefit contribution rates. The concern expressed by the West Virginia BM is if non-union competition increases, because of RTW and pressure rises to keep the union rates low becomes significant, the maintaining of the healthcare program may result in the need to allocate money from the contracted hourly wage rate and into the healthcare contribution rate.

During the West Virginia focus group session union members expressed similar concerns as the Business Manager that the passage of RTW will lead to “low wages” and that “There is no doubt that is part of the dynamic because the average Right-to-Work state wages are down 9% –

11% ”, while another member expressed concern that, “Your livelihood is going down“. One participant in this focus group summarized the union members overall concern for the future, now that West Virginia is Right-to-Work, by emphasizing, “In West Virginia, if you go 11% lower you are in the negatives. So, this is not going to end well”. When considering the input from the study participants from the RTW states of Nebraska, Nevada, and Texas, about hourly wage rates, the concern for the future of the union workers in West Virginia wages is legitimate and has merit. It is difficult to predict the full impact that the passage of RTW will have on the West Virginia union workers hourly wage and benefit contributions, but the perception among the union members is that it will have a negative affect resulting in the need to decrease wage and benefit contribution levels in order to remain competitive in the mechanical construction industry.

With Right-to-Work being part of public discourse in West Virginia, as the legislation was being considered and ultimately passed into law, it was clear that the union members participating in the focus group were well informed about the law and how it may impact their union. Concern over the possibility that some union members may not pay into union dues was on the mind of focus group participants. One union member stated,

What really hurts us is trying to organize and trying to bring another shop in with ten guys. You organize a shop and they say thanks for organizing us, we want your wages but we are not paying your dues. They would all stay to work in that shop and receive our benefits. That is where Right-to-Work really hurts us.

Another focus group participant followed up that point by reiterating the same concern;

I was thinking about the Cracker [large industrial project] and when that hits everybody will be working. When the Cracker is over with, we may have a kind of slow year. Then

you will have the guys bitching I can't afford paying dues and you have the next guy and the next guy.

Union dues are set as a percentage of the workers' hourly wage and paid through a payroll deduction. These participants felt that if work gets slow, and their fellow union members may not be working as many hours as they would like, some workers may decide not to pay their share of the union dues. The union members in this focus group saw how the passage of RTW may result in fewer workers paying union dues and how that would negatively impact the overall ability for the union to operate.

The union members in this study often expressed pride in the level of hourly wage and benefits they receive. As detailed earlier in this analysis, the economic package is jointly negotiated between labor and management, as part of the collective bargaining process and agreement. One particular West Virginia union member linked concern over the hourly wage and benefits to future issues related to the union's negotiating power with the mechanical contractor employers. He stated,

It has historically shown that union labor is in the forefront of benefits and wages. When you take away the negotiating and bargaining power of the union, by lack of funds [union dues], by non-dues paying members, it brings everybody down. It lowers all the standards.

A similar point was reiterated by another West Virginia union member who stated "Unions have better benefits and wages, but that is not likely to sustain itself because of concern that RTW takes away bargaining power because of lack of dues". These union members are looking long term as the impact of Right-to-Work rules and regulations settle into their industry. The perception among the union workers is that the passage of RTW in West Virginia is ultimately

going to negatively impact compensation, organizing efforts, and the union's collective bargaining leverage in contract negotiations.

With union density and membership historically low in RTW states the West Virginia union can expect their membership level to decline overtime. The lowering of union density in West Virginia would potentially result in increased difficulty of maintaining membership and growth for the union. The concern over union membership dropping in RTW states and the added difficulty in operating and maintaining the union is on the minds of the West Virginia Business Manager and focus group participants. With West Virginia becoming RTW there is concern over how this will negatively influence the size of the union and the maintaining of market share in the mechanical construction industry. This concern was expressed by a participant who stated that union membership was higher in NRTW states. The participant pointed out, that in the mechanical construction industry, "Utah was 65% union and now 15%", as a result of becoming RTW. Although difficult to confirm the accuracy of the percentages or over what period of time this decline took place, this was the perception of the member. Another focus group participant added, "If a state becomes RTW it would probably cut union membership in half". Although any direct decrease in union membership and market share is not likely to take place in the immediate short term, it became apparent that this is a concern for the union members from the state of West Virginia.

Additional issues of concern expressed by West Virginia union members include one member stating,

I think the biggest effect it is going to have on us is the single employer unions. They are going to start resenting us. That is what it is right now. If we stay strong, our wages stay high, but theirs are going to drop, no doubt about it. Then they are going to start

resenting us. They like us to come in to do their job at the hospital and I think that is going to be the biggest effect.

The unions participating in this study are multi-employer building trade unions that are utilized by signatory contractors that hire skilled workers from the union hall to perform construction projects. As construction projects are put out for bid any number of firms can submit a bid, whether they are union or non-union. If any union signatory construction firm receives the contract to build a project they will hire the union members from the hall, therefore the workers have the opportunity to work for various companies depending up who receives a project. One focus group participant discussed that as a multi-employer building trades union the negative impact of their state being RTW may be less significant to their union than it will be for individual employer unions in industries such as manufacturing and textiles. His concern is if privately owned unionized employers begin to see competitors lower worker hourly wages and start to gain market share, these unionized companies will struggle to remain competitive. If they begin to see competitors increase market share, because of taking customers from the unionized employers, those unionized employers may be less likely to use the unionized building trades firms. The concern is that as a multi-employer building trade construction union they may not see as dramatically negative impact with RTW compared to single unionized employers. The West Virginia union members have a concern that unionized companies, in different industries, may be less likely to use unionized signatory construction firms for their projects because of the different impact of the passage of RTW has in the mechanical construction industry.

As stand-alone unionized employers begin to have difficulty sustaining a unionized workforce, because of the newly enacted RTW legislation in West Virginia, companies may be

less inclined to hire unionized construction firms to perform projects at their facilities. This concern continued to be highlighted with another union member stating, “A lot of union companies hire us because they are union companies. If they do not have a value for their union, or their company, they are not going to extend that arm to us.” A long-term residual effect of becoming RTW is that individual employers that are unionized may get negatively impacted by the new law more than the multi-employer building trade unions, which may result in these companies no longer using the building trade unions for construction projects. This would directly impact the amount of construction projects awarded to union contractors. There is no research to support this claim but no reason to suggest the concern is not legitimate.

Another union member in the focus group stated, “Single West Virginia employers that are union will begin to resent union trades because of wages” and that “Some employers will not perform work with union trades”. This participant was linking resentment from struggling companies and their unionized workforce with the lowering of market share of building trade unions who perform construction projects at their facilities. Further statements reinforced this concern, over the passage of the RTW law, such as “Union companies that hire union contractors may change now with RTW”. The union members emphasized how one union may resent another based upon how the RTW regulations impact one particular union more than the other. The West Virginia union members indicated a sense of continual and interrelated negative results of becoming a RTW state that will take place over time within their state. The union Business Manager and union members expressed concern over the future of their state, workers, industry, and union as a result of West Virginia’s new RTW status.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This chapter will present a brief summary of the study, relate the findings to the research questions, and suggest possible future studies.

#### **Summary of the Study**

The intention of this study is to better understand the influence Right-to-Work status of a state has on the perceptions union workers in the mechanical construction industry have towards their wages, benefits, and working conditions. The Right-to-Work states of Nebraska, Nevada, and Texas, with the Non-Right-to-Work states of Colorado, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, and the recently RTW transitioned state of West Virginia are the states used in the study. Seven United Association local union Business Managers were interviewed along with seven focus group sessions with a sample of each union's membership. Each individual interview and focus group were conducted with the same protocol. The data collection protocol consisted of in-depth questions on the topic of union member wages, benefits, working conditions, and knowledge of Right-to-Work legislation. Each interview and focus group were audio recorded and transcribed with key statements by the study participants categorized into consistent themes. These core themes and union member statements were highlighted in Chapter 4. Based on the data collective from participant statements there are distinct differences in union member perceptions from RTW states and NRTW specifically when it comes to wages and certain working conditions.

Union members in the Right-to-Work states of Nebraska, Nevada, and Texas perceived their hourly wage rate as too low for what they do on construction job sites. Study participants further indicated that they were not being paid enough as compared to the profit level and



success that they perceive their employers had in the mechanical construction industry. RTW union members expressed some concern over job site safety, specifically when working on projects that have general contractors from southern RTW states managing them. The union members in the Non-Right-to-Work states of Colorado, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and the RTW transition state of West Virginia expressed satisfaction with their hourly wage rate, job site safety, and overall working conditions.

There was no identifiable perception difference among the study participants in these seven states regarding their benefits or how employers provide the workers feedback on their job performance or overall communication between labor and management. Union workers, in both RTW and NRTW states, indicated satisfaction with the healthcare benefits and pension programs provided by their employer through their industry's local collective bargaining agreement. Study participants stated their benefits were "very good" and took particular pride in the high quality of their benefits. In regards to the relationship between the union workers and their employers, there was no identifiable difference among those union members in RTW states and NRTW states in how they perceived their level of feedback and communication received from employers. Union members stated that they did not receive direct feedback from the contractors regarding their job site performance. Receiving a paycheck and longevity of employment were both consistently indicated by participants as the primary means of job performance feedback they receive from their employers.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The United Association Business Managers and union members that participated in this study expressed their perceptions about their wages, benefits, and working conditions, which often differed from one another. It is conceivable that the participants who expressed one

perception or opinion during their one-on-one interview or focus group may have expressed other perceptions if they had been framed and contrasted differently during the sessions. Perhaps if all the union members received the interview and focus group questions in advance of the sessions they would have been more prepared to present their perceptions on the study topics. Receiving of questions in advance could have led to the participants researching the specifics of what is in Right-to-Work legislation. Having the questions in advance could have provided the study participants more time to think about their wages, benefits, and working conditions prior to the interviews and focus groups.

The topics within the interviews for this study focused on union member wages, benefits, working conditions, and RTW legislation. Another limitation is that the subject matter of working conditions focused primarily on performance feedback, employer communication, and job site safety. There are other aspects of working conditions that could be explored in the mechanical construction industry but because of time constraints and the emphasis on wage and benefit perceptions, other working condition factors were not addressed during the interviews and focus group sessions. The last key limitation to this study is the inability to hold follow-up one-on-one Business Manager interviews and union member focus group sessions. Additional information and study participant insight could have been gained through follow-up sessions. Because of the time and expense of traveling to seven different states, along with scheduling difficulties, the researcher could not hold follow-up sessions with the union members in Colorado, Nebraska, Nevada, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, or West Virginia.

## Summary of Data Based on Primary Research Question

The guiding research question of this study is *“How do the Perceptions of Wages, Benefits, and Working Conditions Differ among Unionized Mechanical Construction Workers in Right-to-Work and Non-Right-to-Work States?”*

Union workers value their economic package. Workers who are members of a union understand they are being paid a higher hourly wage because of having union representation. They also understand their healthcare and pension benefits are better than a non-union employee in a similar position. During the focus group sessions, with the United Association union members, in each of the seven states participating in this study, it was clear the workers put a lot of thought into their compensation package. There is a level of pride that the union members have in receiving an above industry average hourly wage and good benefits. Another factor that became apparent during the focus group sessions, which impacts the union workers' perceptions, is how unions compare their own economic packages and work environment with other United Association local unions and other building trades unions, such as sheet metal and electrical local unions. A number of factors influence and help workers to form their perception of their wage, benefits, and working conditions, but based upon information gained during this study, a state's Right-to-Work status is another contributing element.

United Association of Plumbers and Pipefitters union members who work and reside in Right-to-Work states do have differing perceptions regarding their wages, benefits, and working conditions than workers in Non-Right-to-Work states. The differing perceptions are primarily in the areas of wages and job site safety. When it comes to benefits, employer communication, and job site performance feedback there is no identifiable difference in how workers in RTW states and NRTW states perceive them. The elements of working conditions that were brought out in

the focus groups sessions focused on job site safety, employer communication, and performance feedback. Based upon data received from union members and Business Managers, in each of the seven states, there appeared to be no significant difference in how each union member perceived their benefits or their communication with their employer or how they received performance feedback. Union members in both RTW and NRTW states all perceived their benefits as high quality and good, while having limited communication from their employer, and that feedback on their job performance was mainly through receiving a paycheck and longevity of employment. In these specific areas of the research, there was no difference among union member perceptions based upon their state's RTW status. The core differences in union member perceptions, based upon their state's Right-to-Work status, will be presented through the following three additional research questions.

### **Union Member Wage Perceptions**

#### **Summary of Data Based on Secondary Research Question One**

The first sub-question of this study is “How does Right-to-Work status influence unionized mechanical construction worker perceptions of their wages?”

The hourly wage that a worker is paid is important to him or her for a number of reasons. Not only does the amount an individual is paid to perform their job provide them the means to make a living, it also impacts how they see themselves as an individual and how their employer sees them as an employee. Many factors influence what a particular job or individual is paid and how an individual perceives their hourly wage is influenced by numerous factors as well. Study participants understand the construction market and need to remain competitive within the industry. Non-union competition puts pressure to maintain a good hourly wage without pricing union signatory contractors out of the mechanical construction industry. Whether the labor

union was in a Right-to-Work or Non-Right-to-Work state, workers in both expressed an understanding of the importance to have their wage rate remain competitive in the industry.

Data has shown that the average hourly wage rate in Right-to-Work states is lower than those in Non-Right-to-Work states, the union members in this study understood that fact, but the information gained through the one-on-one interviews and focus group sessions provided a deeper understanding of how RTW impacted the participant's perceptions of their compensation. The RTW status of a state appeared to have an influence on union member's perception of their hourly wage. Union workers in Right-to-Work states had distinct differences in how they perceive their wage. The wage perception differences that union workers in RTW states had, that differed than those workers in NRTW states, fell into the following categories,

### **Lower Hourly Wage**

As previous studies have indicated, workers in Right-to-Work states are paid on average a lower hourly wage than employees in Non-Right-to-Work states. United Association union members in this study, those in RTW and NRTW states, understood that being a RTW state meant having a lower hourly wage. Study participants in the states of Nebraska, Nevada, and Texas consistently indicated their hourly wage is lower than it otherwise would be because of their respective state being Right-to-Work. Union members in the RTW states understand that their wage rate is lower because of the law being in place, in their respective state, but their overall perception of their lower wage rate goes beyond this fact. There are a number of factors that goes into the economic package of a local collective bargaining agreement and hourly wage rate, but the union members in each of the three RTW states felt the legislation has an impact as to why their wage is lower than other United Association local unions wage rates in NRTW states. The union members in the states of Colorado, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia felt

their hourly wage rate was satisfactory and enabled them to make a good living for themselves and their families. Based on the data collected from the interviews and focus group sessions, in both the RTW and NRTW states, it is clear that the union members in Nebraska, Nevada, and Texas have a perception that their hourly wage is different and lower than their counterparts in Colorado, Ohio, and Pennsylvania because of their state being Right-to-Work.

### **Wage Low for Level of Job Site Responsibility**

Every job has a set of specific duties and responsibilities that are required to be done by anyone who is holding that position. Every job has tasks that need to be done which requires the worker to have certain skill sets in order to perform them properly. The type of tasks to be performed and the various skills required to perform them influences the hourly wage rate for the job, but another key factor in what someone is paid is how much responsibility that position involves. Being a construction worker on multi-million dollar projects puts a great deal of responsibility on the union members. Making sure construction projects are being completed properly, on-time, and within budget creates stress on those being paid to perform the work. Participants in this study indicated that the factor of job site responsibility has an influence on how they perceive their hourly wage rate.

During the focus group discussion on wages, workers in the state of Texas not only indicated that their wage rate was low, they went further to emphasize that it was not high enough for the level of responsibility they have on construction job sites. The union members perceive their hourly wage as being lower because of being in a RTW state, but the discussions went further into the issue of what they are expected to do on job sites and how the level of responsibility required warrants being paid much more. Union workers in the states of Nebraska, Nevada, and Texas expressed concern that the amount of responsibility they have on

construction job sites is high when considering the financial risk if something is not constructed properly or if projects have cost overruns and are not completed by the stipulated date in the project contract. When considering the risks and what is expected of the union workers, those in RTW states emphasized how their hourly wage rate is too low as it relates to their responsibilities. Although union members in each of the Right-to-Work states in this study expressed this perspective, it was the United Association members in the state of Texas that really emphasized deep concerns on this particular aspect of their hourly compensation.

Union members in the Non-Right-to-Work states of Colorado, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, and the transitioned state of West Virginia, generally indicated that they were paid an hourly wage rate that was appropriate for their tasks and what their employers expect from them on a daily basis. The vast majority of United Association members in the NRTW states felt their hourly wage rate was appropriate for their job site responsibilities. Whether a construction project involves the building of a power plant, hospital, or public school the responsibility put onto a union building trades worker is the same whether they are in a RTW state or not. It was evident from the focus group sessions that the workers in RTW states have a deeper concern over their wage rate not being high enough for the responsibility they carry, but that was particularly the case among the United Association members from Texas.

### **Wage Low Compared to Contribution to Employer Success and Profit**

Employers seek the most qualified individuals as they can to work within their company. The more skilled and qualified an employee is the more productive they will be in their jobs. A good employer realizes their success is directly linked to the productivity of the employees they have working for them. A good worker understands that the level of success their employer has is related to how hard and well employees perform. As study participants were discussing the

topic of wage rates during focus group sessions and the issue of contractor success was raised, a number of members got particularly animated. When union workers in the Right-to-Work states participating in this study discussed how their job performance helps to contribute to company owner financial success, there was a clear difference in their perceptions on this particular issue than that of their NRTW counterparts. Union members in the Non-Right-to-Work states of Colorado, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and the transitioned state of West Virginia stated they are being paid well for the work that they perform and how their work product contributes to the financial success of company owners. There is a sense among the RTW union members that they are not being paid enough relative to their contribution to contractor owner success.

A number of union members from Nebraska, Nevada, and Texas referenced the size of contractor owner homes, types of expensive vehicles the owners drive, and the number of nice vacations that they take as an indication of how successful they are and an indication that their mechanical construction firm is profitable. None of these particular RTW union members had direct knowledge of financial records or the profitability of the construction firms, but saw the expensive items purchased as an indication that they are in fact profitable and doing well financially. Based upon those perceptions, union members indicated that their hourly wage is not high enough as it relates to what their job duties and skill sets do in helping make construction projects be completed efficiently and on-time. A construction project that is completed on time and under budget can lead to financial success for company owners and as a result a number of union members indicated the need to make a higher wage. Some RTW union members felt that contractor owners should share the wealth that the workers are helping to create because of their direct efforts on the job sites resulting in the financial success of the construction projects. If the projects being constructed by the union members are generating



enough profit for owners to purchase expensive items and take nice vacations, then the workers should be paid more than their current hourly wage. This perspective that RTW union members had toward their hourly wage and contractor success was not expressed by the study participants from NRTW states.

## **Union Member Benefit Perceptions**

### **Summary of Data Based on Secondary Research Question Two**

The second sub-question of this study is “How does Right-to-Work status influence unionized construction workers perceptions of their benefits?”

Compensating a worker today typically includes paying an hourly wage or salary and also benefits, such as healthcare and retirement. Workers can easily see what their take home pay is but when it comes to benefits, although they may not see the total cost of providing those benefits, they do understand the quality of their healthcare and pension. It is the quality of the healthcare coverage and retirement plans that influence how workers perceive these benefits. Union members in this study expressed deep appreciation for the quality of benefits that they receive. Each of the seven United Association unions that participated in this study indicated they receive very good healthcare coverage and retirement benefits. The healthcare programs among the seven unions may have variations to specific benefits and coverage provided, but there are no differences between those unions in Right-to-Work states and those in Non-Right-to-Work in regards to being satisfied with their healthcare program. Similar perceptions are held toward the pension program that the union members participate in and the retirement benefits they receive. The pension programs may vary from union to union in regards to the hourly contribution rate or the defined benefit levels received, but study participants from each of the seven unions expressed satisfaction towards their retirement plans. Not only did workers express

high satisfaction towards their benefits, they were particularly proud of their benefits. Based on the data received during this study the Right-to-Work status of a state did not influence the UA member perceptions of their benefits.

### **Union Member Working Condition Perceptions**

#### **Summary of Data Based on Secondary Research Question Three**

The third sub-question of this study is “How does Right-to-Work status influence unionized mechanical construction worker’s perceptions of their working conditions?”

Working conditions consist of a variety of elements in the workplace. Whether it is working inside or outside, being behind a desk or on a plant floor, working up high or underground, or in the heat or cold, these are examples of physical working conditions. Non-physical working conditions of the workplace include internal communications, employer procedures and policies, the employer and employee relationship. In this study working conditions focused mainly on job site safety, employer communication, and job performance feedback. The Right-to-Work status of a state appeared to have an influence on the union member’s perception of their working conditions. Aspects of working conditions that were emphasized in this study were job site safety, employer to employee communication, and job site performance feedback. Union workers in Right-to-Work states had distinct differences in how they perceive job site safety as compared to those workers in Non-Right-to-Work states. Union workers had similar perceptions on the level of communication between themselves and their employers and how the construction firms provide the union members feedback on their job performance. The following are each of the working conditions addressed in the study and key conclusions from the individual interviews and focus group sessions.

## **Job Site Safety**

By the nature of the tasks involved the construction industry is hazardous. With the use of equipment, working in heights, in ditches, lifting of heavy building materials, and machinery, the construction industry has safety concerns that both employers and employees must accept. Union members generally expressed feeling safe on construction sites and that their employers provide a good and productive work environment. Although the heavy construction industry can be dangerous for workers and requires caution and genuine respect for safety, participants consistently stated that signatory mechanical contractors provide them as safe a workplace as possible. The perception among the union members, whether from a Right-to-Work state or not, although there was one exception in regards to general contractors from RTW states. United Association members expressed concern that when signatory mechanical contractors are a sub-contractor to a general contractor from a RTW state there appeared to be less concern or focus on job site safety. Participants were not suggesting that the general construction firms, located in southern RTW states, were knowingly unsafe or intentionally creating an unsafe work environment, but that the level of awareness and safety consciousness they have come to expect from local signatory mechanical contraction firms were not what they were experiencing with the general contractors. The sense among the union workers is that the culture from the southern RTW states did not involve safety like the environment in NRTW states.

A number of union workers stated that when on construction projects, where the general contractor is from a southern RTW state, they sense less focus on safety and safety training. There were no stated instances of unsafe practices or specific accidents but a number of workers felt a lower emphasis for safety on projects where general contractors from southern states were working as compared to the local signatory mechanical contractors. Union workers from the

NRTW states have similar points in regards to general contractors from a RTW southern state when they secure construction projects in their home state. When working for a mechanical construction firm, that is a sub-contractor to a RTW southern general contractor, some of the union workers notice a difference in the focus on safety compared to general contractors from NRTW states. The consensus among the UA members is that their job sites are safe, but study participants in both types of states indicated a difference when working for general contractors from RTW southern states. Union workers indicated that RTW general contractors do not take safety as seriously as those general contractors or mechanical contractors from NRTW states.

### **Employer and Employee Communication**

Communication is an essential part of how an organization functions and operates. Whether it is communicating company policies, practices, or the dissemination of general information, employers need to have an effective system in place for employees. When a workplace is unionized, the communication process has the added element of union representatives. Labor relations involves how the union and signatory employer engage one another, work together, and communicate over a period of time. Participants not only communicate with the construction firms that employ them but also with union representatives. When it comes to communication between signatory mechanical construction firms and their United Association of Plumbers and Pipefitters union members, participants from both Right-to-Work and Non-Right-to-Work states, expressed similar perceptions. Union members indicated that there was little or no direct communication from their employers.

Job site supervisors provide communication related to project management and oversight, but limited communication from the mechanical construction firm owners. There was no distinct difference between union workers in RTW or NRTW states in regards to their perceptions of

how their employers communicate with the workers. As study participants discussed having limited direct communication from mechanical construction firm owners, they also indicated that this is not a concern or issue because of being professionally trained and skilled workers. The United Association workers know what their job tasks and duties are when on construction sites and stated during the focus group discussions they do not necessarily need or expect communication from company owners. As signatory contractors, mechanical construction firms realize they are getting well trained and highly skilled building trade workers when calling the union hall to staff construction projects. Based on information provided by the union members participating in this study, it is clear that one area of improvement for labor and management is increasing their lines of communication. It is important to state that a number of union members, both from RTW and NRTW states, indicated they did not need a great deal of communication from the construction firms other than which project they received and when it starts.

### **Employer Feedback on Union Worker Performance**

After reviewing the study participants input on the level of communication that takes place between employers and the union workers, it was not surprising that the workers indicated that there was little or no direct feedback provided on their job performance. If communication is generally limited between company owners and the employees, it would be unlikely that feedback on employee performance would be taking place. That was the consensus among the study participants but it was interesting what the union members perceive as feedback in regards to their construction site job performance. Union members in both Right-to-Work and Non-Right-to-Work states expressed how they see the receiving of pay checks and longevity of employment as feedback on their performance. The receiving of a paycheck was stated as enough feedback among many of the union workers participating in this study, but how long they

remain employed by a mechanical construction firm provides them with a clear indication of how well, or not well, they are performing their job duties.

If a United Association member is hired by a contractor out of the union hall for a specific construction project, and they remain with the company after the project is completed, they perceive it as positive feedback on their performance. If a construction project is beginning to reach completion and a union worker is laid off before others on the job, they perceive that as negative feedback. When it comes to employer feedback, there was no significant difference between how participants in RTW and NRTW states thought about how it is being done. Union members who expressed their perception of how job performance feedback is provided by mechanical construction firm owners, they indicated that it was reflected in receiving an hourly wage and a paycheck, in addition to how long they work for a contractor or the order in which they are laid off from construction projects.

### **Anti-Union Sentiment**

Research questions focus on gaining a better understanding of how the Right-to-Work status of a state influences union work perceptions of their wages, benefits, and working conditions. Although the researcher did not specifically seek union member's perceptions regarding anti-union sentiment that may be within their work environment, it was raised throughout a number of the one-on-one interviews and focus group sessions. Right-to-Work is legislation enacted by elective representatives so there needs to be public and political support to get the law passed. RTW is viewed as legislation that is anti-union and pro-business, so for a state to have the law in place there must be a public and workplace culture that does not support unions. Union members from the NRTW states indicated that they have experienced anti-union sentiment in their work environment and on construction job sites, but not to the degree of what

takes place within RTW states. Anti-union sentiment was particularly significant in the RTW state of Texas.

During the focus group session in Texas the researcher was particularly surprised by the story one of the union members discussed among the group. He detailed a situation where a young adult learned that this study participant was a welder and has a career in mechanical construction industry. The union member informed the individual about the five-year apprentice program that trains workers to become a union journeyman. He told the individual that the five-year training is paid for by the construction firms and he could earn their journeyman status with no financial debt. This young man responded to the union professional by saying his father has told him he would rather pay tens of thousands of dollars for his son to attend a trade school to become a welder than see him join the union. When a father is willing to pay tens of thousands of dollars for his son to get trained at a trade school to become a welder so that he does not become a union member reflects the deep level of anti-union sentiment in the RTW state of Texas. If anti-union sentiment is so engrained that it is passed down from generation to generation in this manner it is unlikely that the culture in Texas will ever change.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The participation of the United Association union members from West Virginia provided interesting insight regarding perceptions of their wages, benefits, and working conditions. It was clear that the union members were knowledgeable on Right-to-Work legislation because of it recently being passed by their state legislature and enacted into law. As the focus group session was taking place West Virginia was transitioning to a Right-to-Work state. The UA members in West Virginia were generally satisfied with their wage level, proud of the healthcare and

retirement benefits they receive, and expressed mostly positive comments about their working conditions and job site safety.

A consideration for future research would be to conduct a focus group session with the West Virginia United Association of Plumbers and Pipefitters members five and 10 years from the date of this study. Conducting a follow-up focus group session with the same participants who took part in this study would determine and identify any change in their perceptions of their wages, benefits, and working conditions. As Right-to-Work legislation is enacted and in place for a period of time, it would be insightful and beneficial to see any changes to the workplace and industry that the law influences and how that alters the union worker's perceptions of their wages, benefits, and working conditions. Conducting a narrowly focused study on the recently RTW transitioned state of West Virginia, in the future, would add to this study by providing data on the change in the union workers perceptions from being a NRTW state and then transitioning to RTW. With this study focusing on unionized mechanical construction workers, a future study on non-union mechanical construction workers perceptions of wages, benefits, and working conditions in the Right-to-Work states of Nebraska, Nevada, and Texas and the Non-Right-to-Work states of Colorado, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, along with the transitioned Right-to-Work state of West Virginia would provide insightful data to compare and contrast with this research.

### **Conclusion and Final Reflection**

Wages, benefits, and working conditions are an essential part of an employee's job and professional career. These three elements of an employee's job influence their relationship with their employer. How workers perceive their wages, benefits, and working conditions has an effect on their level of job satisfaction. Unionized workers, on average, have higher hourly wage rates and quality of healthcare and pension benefits compared to non-union workers. Right-to-



Work legislation prohibits any individual from being required to join a union, as a condition of employment, and prohibits unions from mandating workers to pay union dues and administrative fees. The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of how the Right-to-Work status of a state impacts the perceptions that unionized building construction trade workers have regarding their wages, benefits, and working conditions.

Social Exchange Theory, and what it says about the need for social exchanges to lead to equilibrium, provides the theoretical framework for this research. As union members seek to maximize their level of wages and benefits, and employers seek to maximize profits, it is essential for organized labor and company owners to find equilibrium. As both groups influence one another through actions and behaviors, each will conform to norms within their working relationship. As it relates to this study, equilibrium is achieved by striking a balance between the union and the employer wherein both parties work through the give and take of their relationship. Through the collective bargaining process, the union negotiates with construction firm owners wages, benefits, and working conditions on behalf of their members. As both parties go through this process, each group influences one another as norms are formed during contract negotiations. Better understanding of the needs of each party will allow achievement of this state of equilibrium so both labor and management can successfully collectively bargain.

Data from this research resulted in the following themes related to union worker's perceptions of wages, benefits, and working conditions: Satisfaction, communication/feedback, safety, union sentiment, adaptation, appreciation, and concern. Within these themes are data that is beneficial to both union and management in reaching equilibrium in the collective bargaining process. The themes became apparent after interviews and focus groups sessions with the United Association of Plumbers and Pipefitters union members. A significant finding of this research is

that these perceptions varied in level of significance and importance to the workers and their representatives interviewed. Weights and rankings in terms of importance became apparent upon reviewing the data. Considering these priorities and ranking them based on union member's perceptions in advance of negotiations can be of value to both parties in the collective bargaining process

Union workers in Right-to-Work states have strong perceptions regarding their level of wages. The satisfaction level toward wages is low and was found to be significantly impacted by how they contrast it with the success of the company owners. Indicators such as the size of the company owner's home, type of vehicle they drive, and expensive vacations they take lead to a belief among the union workers that they should be receiving a higher rate of pay. This perception can dramatically impact the collective bargaining process as the union representatives negotiate with company owners. This wage satisfaction issue is not weighted as highly for those union workers in Non-Right-to-Work states where the data showed that they perceived owner's success correlated with their wages and future job longevity.

Safety on job sites is very important to all union members, in both RTW and NRTW states. The perception among union workers is that mechanical construction firms do provide a safe working environment, and that it is of high importance to them. With the issue of safety being valued so highly among union members this can be used by employers during the collective bargaining process by emphasizing the efforts they make in creating that environment during contract talks.

Anti-union sentiment is significant among RTW states where the public does not hold unions in high regard. In these states employers have leverage over the unions in their ability to negotiate wage and benefits. Anti-union sentiment benefits the employer in RTW states during

contract negotiations because this public animus towards unions provides added leverage for the construction firms to negotiate lower wage and benefit levels. Within the NRTW states this research did not find similar anti-union sentiment, negating the ability for employers to use it as leverage for themselves going into contract negotiations.

There was a great deal of concern for the future among study participants in the transition RTW state of West Virginia. Given that the state recently enacted right to work laws, there is increased concern among unionized workers about a decrease in wages and benefits occurring as a result of diminished negotiation leverage with the construction firm owners. This view was ranked highly with the transitioned RTW state, and other participants in NRTW states also expressed concern over the possibility of their state having the law enacted at some point in the future. The legitimate concern over the potential passage of Right-to-Work legislation is a factor that should be raised by both labor and management during the collective bargaining process.

Union workers in both RTW and NRTW states indicated that there is minimal communication from company owners especially in regards to job performance feedback. Although the United Association union members indicated that limited communication takes place between them and construction firm owners, they were not dissatisfied with it or felt that it negatively impacted their ability to complete the tasks they are paid to perform. This was because, for many, simply receiving a paycheck and having employment longevity was enough feedback. While this aspect of their working environment was not assigned a great deal of importance it could be an area in which labor and management can work together to improve.

A beneficial result of this research is gaining a better understanding of union worker's perceptions of wages, benefits, and working conditions and how this knowledge can be used to improve labor-management relations. Application of Social Exchange Theory and the weighting

and the relative importance of these issue can help negotiators for labor unions and employers better understand one another and how to reach equilibrium and successful negotiations during the collective bargaining process. Findings from this research and ranking of perceptions among the union members can provide a valuable tool for management when looking to negotiate a new collective bargaining agreement. Finding equilibrium during and at the conclusion of the collective bargaining process can result in a more positive and productive working relationship among the union workers and company owners.

As the Executive Vice President of Laurel Mechanical Contractors Association, for over 23 years, a great deal of experience has been gained on matters related to wages, benefits, working conditions, and the unionized mechanical construction industry. Representing construction firms, and being responsible for their labor relation needs with United Association Plumbers and Pipefitter unions, there has always been a particular interest in how the union members perceive their hourly wage and benefits. Being a management trustee on the mechanical construction industry's pension programs and healthcare plan has provided ample knowledge on labor economics and benefit administration. Gaining insight on United Association union members perceptions of their wages, benefits, and working conditions has been beneficial in the capacity of being a management representative in the industry. Comparing the union members from those who live and work in a Right-to-Work state, with those who do not, resulted in a better understanding of how this legislation impacts the worker's perceptions.

Traveling to Colorado, Nebraska, Nevada, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, and West Virginia, to conduct the one-on-one interviews and focus groups sessions, brought a clear perspective on the United Association of Plumbers and Pipefitters union member's perceptions, along with being able to compare those perceptions from Right-to-Work and Non-Right-to-Work

states. It was a pleasure getting to know the Business Managers and individual union members during the interviews and focus groups. Each study participant provided a contribution to this research, in their own unique way, and their time and input assisted in a better understanding of how the RTW status of their stated influences their perceptions. It is clear that the UA local union Business Managers take their responsibility to their membership and organization seriously. It is evident that individual union members are proud of their union and the work they perform within the mechanical construction industry. Although study participants have varying levels of knowledge of the specifics of Right-to-Work legislation, all of the union members have the perception that the law is anti-union and results in lower hourly wage rates.

It is not a surprise that union workers in Right-to-Work states feel their hourly wage is low, but interesting the level of influence the success of company owners impact their perception. The reality is that workers in RTW states do see a lower average wage rate than employees in NRTW states, but the deep perception that the United Association members in Nebraska, Nevada, and particularly Texas, have on this issue went beyond just the actual lower dollar amount. The perception among the RTW workers is not just that their hourly wage is lower than it should be, but that it is not high enough in regards to how much responsibility the participants have on construction job sites. RTW union members went further, particularly from the state of Texas, as these participants perceive their hourly wage not high enough as it relates to how their job site contribution results in construction firm owner financial success. When it comes to the actual hourly wage rate, how much responsibility the workers have, and how much their work product helps create financial success for company owners, the RTW union members perceive their hourly wage as being too low. The study participants from the Non-Right-to-Work states of Colorado, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and the transitioned state of West Virginia

generally perceive their hourly wage as fair and at an appropriate level based on their job duties and what they perform for construction firms.

As the participants discussed their working relationship with signatory contractors they consistently indicated that there is little or no direct feedback provided on their job performance. The union members indicated that upper management and company owners do not provide union workers with direct feedback on how they are performing on the construction job sites. Regarding this aspect of their working conditions there is no distinction between those workers in Right-to-Work states and those who are not, on the issue of not receiving direct performance feedback from company owners. Lack of job performance evaluation and feedback did not appear to be concerning to the union members in any of the seven states participating in this study. What is particularly interesting is the degree to which the receiving of a paycheck and longevity of being employed by a contractor provided the union workers their performance feedback. Receiving a paycheck and how long the construction firms retained the union workers as employees is enough feedback on how they are performing their job site duties.

Heavy construction has one of the highest accident incident rates of any industry. The nature of the construction industry, with large equipment and machinery, working underground and in high building structures, the issue of safety is a significant part of the union worker and company work environment. As a professional in the industry, representing the construction firms, it was positive to listen to the union workers during the focus group sessions consistently state how they feel safe on job sites and that the mechanical construction firms provide them the resources needed to perform their duties safely. An area of some concern is job sites where the union workers and mechanical construction firm are working as a sub-contractor to general construction firm that is from southern Right-to-Work states. Study participants, from both

RTW and NRTW states, indicated a sense of less awareness for safety from southern state general contractors from RTW states that perform projects in the unions home jurisdiction.

Right-to-Work legislation is accepted as an anti-union and pro-business law so it is not a surprise that participants from the states of Nebraska, Nevada, and Texas expressed a sense of negativity throughout their professional career. The focus group session from Texas left a deep impression in regards to the union workers perception of how anti-union their state is and how much it is engrained among the general public. The union member who described the encounter he had with a young individual who was interested in a career in welding, but whose father told him he would rather pay tens of thousands of dollars to send his son to a trade school, instead of seeing him join a union apprenticeship program, really highlighted the deep anti-union sentiment in the culture of the state of Texas. The long term enactment of Right-to-Work legislation, in the state of Texas, is a result of this ant-union sentiment and influenced the perception of the union members. That focus group encounter has left an impression and interest in exploring the culture in Texas that has resulted in such a deep seeded anti-union perception among the general public.

The inclusion of a United Association of Plumber and Pipefitters union from the state of West Virginia provided valuable insight for this study. As West Virginia recently enacted Right-to-Work legislation the union members participating in this study had a unique set of perceptions and future concern for their industry that is important to include in the research. Union members expressed concern that overtime their union membership will likely decrease as a result of the passage of RTW and that non-union competition will increase in the mechanical construction industry. Union members from West Virginia are well aware of RTW and what the law involves because it received much public attention. Concern over their hourly wage rate, quality of benefits, union membership size, and market share is understandable and not a surprise. During

the focus group session, a number of West Virginia union members indicated concern over how other unions and unionized employers would react to the building trade unions as the impact of RTW begins to occur within the state. The focus group participants felt that the negative impact of RTW may not be as significant to the building construction trade unions as compared to unions in other industries, such as manufacturing, healthcare, and education. It was unexpected to see the concern and perception among the union members that other industries and unionized employers may be negatively impacted more by the passage of RTW and resent the building trade unions to the degree of not using them for future construction projects.

After conducting the research for this study, completing the seven individual interviews with union United Association of Plumbers and Pipefitters Business Managers and the seven focus group sessions, and analyzing the data, the most unexpected and interesting perception came from a number of union members from Texas. Although the union members in Texas indicated that their wage rate is lower than it should be because of being a RTW state, that there is a high level of anti-union sentiment among the general public and employers, they expressed deep appreciation for being a union member in Texas. With the difficulties of being a union in a RTW state and the pro-business environment held in Texas, the union members are pleased with the opportunity to be in a union. The Texas study participants have sincere pride in being a United Association union member with the quality of wages and benefits they receive working in the mechanical construction industry while being in such an anti-union culture.



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Appendix A

Letter of Introduction

**Indiana University of Pennsylvania**

**Letter of Introduction**

My name is Todd McKeever and I'm currently a student at Indiana University of Pennsylvania completing my Ph.D. I'm conducting a study entitled "*How do the Perceptions of Wages, Benefits, and Working Conditions Differ among Unionized Mechanical Construction Workings in Right-to-Work and Non-Right-to-work States?*"

I'm contacting you to seek your interest in my research and would appreciate your input by participating in this study. Your participation would include an individual interview with me along with a focus group session with 6 to 8 of your active union members.

In coming weeks I will contact you to discuss the study in detail with the hope of you having interest in participating in an interview and assisting with obtaining focus group participants. If you have questions about the study, feel free to contact me at 724-454-1494 or [todd.mckeever@iup.edu](mailto:todd.mckeever@iup.edu).

I look forward to speaking with you.

With kind regards,

Todd M. McKeever  
Ph.D. Candidate  
Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
724-454-1494  
[todd.mckeever@iup.edu](mailto:todd.mckeever@iup.edu)

Appendix B

Site Approval Letter

School of Graduate Studies and Research  
Institutional Review Board (IRB)  
Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
Stright Hall, Room 113  
210 South Tenth Street  
Indiana, PA 15705-1081

**Subject:** Site Approval Letter

For Todd McKeever's Research: "How do the Perceptions of Wages, Benefits, and Working Conditions Differ Among Unionized Mechanical Construction Workers in Right-to-Work and Non-Right-to-Work States?"

Dear IUP IRB Committee,

The following is my approval letter for Todd McKeever to conduct a research project entitled "*How do the Perceptions of Wages, Benefits, and Working Conditions Differ Among Unionized Mechanical Construction Workers in Right-to-Work and Non-Right-to-Work States*" at U.A. Local Union (number) located in (state). I give my approval for the interview and focus group to be conducted at our facility.

The union is pleased to provide their time and information to participate in the study and assist with participant recruitment. If we have any concerns or questions I will contact the IRB at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. I accept the protocol and any risks to the union hall and authorize the research project to continue.

Sincerely,

Name  
Business Manager  
UA Local Union Number  
Street Address  
State  
Zip code

## Appendix C

### Consent Form for Interview and Focus Group Study Participation

#### **CONSENT FORM FOR INTERVIEW and FOCUS GROUP STUDY PARTICIPATION**

Dear Study Participant,

My name is Todd McKeever and I'm working on a doctorate degree and need your input for a research project. The project involves collecting information from a sample of United Association Business Managers and active union workers in the mechanical construction industry. The study involves a one-on-one interview with the Business Manager and a focus group interview of 6 to 8 active union members which would focus on asking questions pertaining to perceptions of wages, benefits, and working conditions. The questions are geared to assess how union member's perceptions may differ between those who work in a Right-to-Work state and those who work in a non-Right-to-Work state. Responses during the interview and focus groups sessions will be kept purely anonymous.

Any participation in this research is voluntary. Results of the research may be published but your identity will be kept confidential and your name will not be disclosed. Research will be conducted in two parts. First, I will send a background questionnaire to collect demographic information. Focus group participants will be selected based on the demographic information collected. I will travel to your local union hall to complete the interview and focus group session with 6 - 8 union members. All information will remain confidential and not shared nor will your name be published in the final study document.

The individual interview with the U.A. Business Manager and focus group session with union members should each last approximately two hours. The following is important related to your participation in this study.

1. You may decline to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without consequences.
2. Your identity will be kept confidential.

3. Todd McKeever, the researcher, has explained the parameters of the research and addressed any questions or concerns you have expressed.
4. Your name will not be associated with the interview or focus group however biographical information must be completed as accurately as possible.
5. Data will be stored in a secure and locked area. The data will be held for a period of three years and then destroyed.
6. Research results will be used for publication.

By signing this form you acknowledge that you understand the nature of the study and the means by which your participation will be kept confidential. Your signature on this form indicates that you are 18 years old or older and that you give your permission to voluntarily serve as a participant in the study described. I would like to audio record the interview and focus group session so to better translate the session into writing. Your permission is required in writing and signing this consent form provides that permission. If you do not wish to be audio recorded I can then take manual notes of the session. Recordings will be kept for further analysis, but once the session and audio recording is transcribed in writing, the recording will be destroyed.

The results from the interview and focus group data will be included in the research paper and reported as a group and not by individual survey response. It will take several months to compile the information. The results will be available upon your request.

I want to express my sincere appreciation for your time in helping me reach one step closer to the completion of a doctorate degree.

Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

Todd M. McKeever  
Ph.D. Candidate  
Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
724-454-1494  
[todd.mckeever@iup.edu](mailto:todd.mckeever@iup.edu)

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I have reviewed this consent form and voluntarily accept to be a participant in the study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Print Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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Appendix D

Background Questionnaire

**BACKGROUND QUESTIONNAIRE**

This brief questionnaire gathers demographic information prior to conducting the focus group session at your union hall.

**Please answer each question by placing an X in the box and filling in the appropriate information on the line.**

1. Gender:             Female     Male

2. Age: \_\_\_\_\_

3. Years of Experience in the union mechanical construction trade: \_\_\_\_\_

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME AND ASSISTANCE!

Appendix E

Audio Recording Individual and Focus Group Approval Form

**Approved Signature for Audio Recording  
Individual and Focus Group Interviews**

I would like to audio record the interview and focus group session that you will be participating in for this study. Your written approval is required. If you do not want to be audio recorded you have the right to leave the interview or focus group at any time. Recordings are utilized for additional analysis and note confirmation.

I consent to the audio recording of my participation in this study. (Initial here)

\_\_\_\_\_.

By signing this form, you acknowledge that you understand the nature of the study, the risks to you as a participant, and the process for keeping your identity confidential. Your signature on this form indicates that you are at least 18 years of age and you give permission to voluntarily serve as a participant in the study described.

Signature of the interviewee \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of the researcher \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_



## Appendix F

### Expert Review of Interview Guide and Questions

Use the following questions to critique my interview guide for the individual Business Manager and focus groups comprised of mechanical construction trade union members. Feel free to contact me at 724-454-1494 or email at [todd.mckeever@iup.edu](mailto:todd.mckeever@iup.edu). Thank you for providing feedback.

1. Introduction
  - a. Is the introductory statement of purpose clear?
2. Format:
  - a. Is the interview format clear?
  - b. Are the questions understandable?
  - c. Does the format flow for a group discussion?
3. Directions:
  - a. Are the directions clear and concise?
4. Feasibility:
  - a. Is the instrument practical?
  - b. Is the instrument too long?
5. Do you have suggestions on the format and presentation of the focus group session schedule?
6. Are the questions regarding union worker perceptions of wages appropriate?
7. Are the questions regarding union worker perceptions of benefits appropriate?
8. Are the questions regarding union worker perceptions of working conditions appropriate?
9. Are the questions regarding union worker perceptions of Right-to-Work legislation appropriate?
10. Do you have any suggestions on the overall focus group interview guide?
11. Do you have any suggestions for questions to be added or deleted to the interview guide?

## Appendix G

### Union Business Manager Interview Questions

#### **Introduction and Ground Rules**

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. The topic and issue for this interview is on union perceptions of wages, fringe benefits, working conditions, and Right-to-Work legislation. My name is Todd McKeever and I am conducting this study as part of my requirements for completing my Ph.D. at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. You were asked to participate in this interview because you are a current Business Manager in the unionized mechanical construction industry. I want to tap into your experience in the industry and gain your perceptions on a number of important elements of your work environment and industry.

To ensure privacy and confidentiality you have been assigned a number, which is how you will be referred to during this interview. Please do not disclose specific details from this session outside of this interview. This session will be audio recorded so that I will not miss any of your comments and once it is transcribed, the recording will be destroyed. Thank you again for participating and let's begin.

#### **Union Business Manager Interview Questions**

- 1) What state is your local union located in?
- 2) How many years have you been a United Association local union member?  
\_\_\_ 2-5 \_\_\_ 6-10 \_\_\_ 11-15 \_\_\_ 16-20 \_\_\_ 20+
- 3) How many years have you been the elected Business Manager for this local union?  
\_\_\_ 2-5 \_\_\_ 6-10 \_\_\_ 11-15 \_\_\_ 16-20 \_\_\_ 20+
- 4) What is your U.A. Local Union number?
- 5) How many active working individuals are members of this local union?

- 6) How many current retirees are members of this local union?
- 7) What is the approximate rate of employment in this local union at the present time?
- 8) To what extent do you think the local union members find their work in the mechanical construction industry challenging?
- 9) To what extent do you think the local union members are satisfied with the level of responsibility they have in their job? Please elaborate.
- 10) Do you think the local union members have a sense of worthwhile accomplishment in the work they perform? Please explain.
- 11) How would you describe the degree of respect and fair treatment that the local union members receive from contractor firm supervision and management?
- 12) If you were to ask the union members how management, within the mechanical construction industry, informs them of how they are performing, how would they respond?
- 13) Can you tell me the degree to which the local union members feel valued by management?
- 14) Can you describe for me the level of satisfaction the local union members have with their hourly wage?
- 15) When talking with the local union members do you sense they feel their income in the mechanical construction trade is sufficient to support their family?
- 16) Would the local union members say their pay level is appropriate considering the responsibilities they are expected to fulfill in their job?
- 17) When talking with the local union members, what is your sense of how fairly compensated they are for what they contribute to the mechanical contractors business?

18) When considering the cost of fringe benefits today, do you think the local union members have a true understanding and appreciation of what it takes to provide them their health care and retirement benefits?

19) When considering the quality of the benefits provided in your union's health and welfare program how satisfied do you think the members are with the plan coverage?

20) If followed up and asked specifically, how do you think the local union members would express the quality of health care coverage for their families?

21) How do you think the local union members would rate their health insurance coverage; better, worse, or about the same, as compared to other employers?

22) Moving onto retirement benefits, how satisfied do you think the local union members are with the quality of the pension program and their pension benefits?

23) If followed up and asked specifically, how do you think the local union members would describe the quality of their pension benefits in regards to being sufficient to care for their families upon retirement?

24) How do you think the local union members would rate their pension benefits; better, worse, or about the same, as compared to other employers?

25) In the building trades construction industry, union members typically stay working in the industry throughout their professional career, but if you were to ask the local union members if it would be hard to find other jobs with the same quality of benefits they now receive, would do you think their response would be?

26) When the local union members are talking amongst themselves, how do you think they describe their working conditions and work environment?

27) Do you think the local union members are comfortable and feel safe in their work environment?

28) How familiar do you feel the local union members are with Right-to-Work legislation and what this legislation means to a unionized construction industry?

29) Do you think the local union members would say that Right-to-Work legislation has a direct impact on their wages, benefits, and working conditions? Please elaborate.

30) If asked specifically, would the average local union member feel they are better off or worse off because of your states Right-to-Work status?

## Appendix H

### Union Member Focus Group Questions

#### **Introduction and Ground Rules**

Welcome and thank you for taking the time to participate in this focus group session. The topic and issue for this session is on union perceptions of wages, fringe benefits, working conditions, and Right-to-Work legislation. My name is Todd McKeever and I am conducting this study as part of my requirements for completing my Ph.D. at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. You were invited to participate in this focus group because you are an active union member in the mechanical construction industry. I want to tap into your experience in the industry and gain your perceptions on a number of important elements of your work environment.

The following are some ground rules to help make for a productive focus group session. Confidentiality can't be 100% guaranteed, but to ensure privacy and confidentiality for each of you, you each have an assigned number, which is how you will be referred to during this session. Please do not disclose specific details from this session outside of this focus group. There is no right or wrong answer to the questions posed nor to one another's own perceptions, so please be respectful to one another's comments and do not repeat what is stated here in order to respect one another's privacy. This session will be audio recorded so that I will not miss any of your comments and once it is transcribed, the recording will be destroyed.

Feel free to have a conversation with one another and speak directly to each other. I am here to ask questions, listen, and make sure that everyone participating has the opportunity to express themselves. I am interested to hear from each of you and will look to get input from everyone. If you have a cell phone, please put it on quiet mode, and step out of the session if you need to answer it. Thank you again for participating and let's begin.

### Union Member Focus Group Interview Questions

- 1) What state is your local union located in where each of you are members?
- 2) How many years have each of you been a United Association local union member?  
\_\_\_ 2-5 \_\_\_ 6-10 \_\_\_ 11-15 \_\_\_ 16-20 \_\_\_ 20+
- 3) What is your U.A. Local Union number?
- 4) Approximately how many active working members are there in this local union?
- 5) Approximately how many retirees are members of this local union?
- 6) What is the approximate rate of employment in this local union at the present time?
- 7) To what extent does each of you find the work you perform in the mechanical construction industry to be challenging?
- 8) To what degree is each of you satisfied with the level of responsibility you have with in your job?
- 9) How would each of you describe your sense of worthwhile accomplishment in the work you perform in the mechanical construction industry?
- 10) I am interested to better understand the level of respect and fair treatment that each of you receives from supervision and management. Can you describe it to me?
- 11) How does management, with in the mechanical construction firms that you work for, inform each of you on how you are performing in your jobs? How well do the construction firms provide feedback to each of you?
- 12) Can you describe to me the degree to which you feel valued by management?
- 13) How satisfied are each of you with the current hourly wage?
- 14) Do you see your annual income, in the mechanical construction trade, sufficient to raise and support a family? Please explain.

15) Based upon the amount of responsibility your job has on a construction site, do you feel your level of pay is appropriate considering your responsibilities? If not, why do you feel that way?

16) The work that you do on a given day has a great deal to do with how successful and profitable a construction firm is, with that in mind, do you think you are fairly compensated for what you contribute to the mechanical contractors operations?

17) On the topic of benefits, do you know the true cost of providing both your health care and pension benefits? If so, what does each benefit cost?

18) When considering the quality of the health care benefits provided in the union program, are you satisfied with the quality of the plan coverage? Please explain.

19) Specifically, regarding the health care coverage for your family members, how satisfied are you with their benefits and do you see the coverage as sufficient care for your families?

20) How would each of you rate your health care benefits; better, worse, or about the same, as compared to other employer and union programs?

21) Regarding the pension program that you participate in, how satisfied are you with the quality of the retirement benefits?

22) Upon retirement do you expect the pension benefits earned will be sufficient to care for your families? Please explain.

23) How would each of you rate your pension benefit program; better, worse, or about the same, as compared to other employer and union retirement plans?



- 24) Based on the quality of fringe benefits that you now receive, do you feel you could find another job with an employer, outside of the unionized construction industry, that provides the same or better level of benefits?
- 25) The building trades construction industry provides a unique work environment for workers. How would you describe your working conditions and how satisfied are you with your work environment?
- 26) How comfortable are you in your work environment and do you feel safe? Please explain.
- 27) What do you know about and how familiar are you with Right-to-Work legislation and what this legislation means to a union?
- 28) Do you think your state's Right-to-Work status has a direct impact on your wages, benefits, and working conditions? Please explain.
- 29) As a member of a local union, do you think your union is better off, or less better off, because of your states Right-to-Work status? Please explain.
- 30) Is there any final comments or input you would like to share regarding your wages, benefits, working conditions, or Right-to-Work legislation that you would like to express?