

How to Save the U.S. Labor Movement

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The first step in saving the labor movement is recognizing that it needs saving. Sadly, many union leaders — including Richard Trumka of the AFL-CIO — refuse to accept this reality, choosing instead to dismiss the current threats against labor unions as “exaggerated,” or limited to this or that Republican politician. In fact, the labor movement — especially public sector unions — is facing nationwide attacks by Democrats and Republicans alike.

On a state-by-state basis unions are being blamed for the budget deficits that are the result of the Great Recession — itself triggered by Wall Street and fueled by declining taxes on corporations and the rich. This massive recession is certain to create deficits for years to come, guaranteeing that the cross-hairs will remain firmly on the backs of labor unions, since the backs of the corporations escaped the cross-hairs by their domination of the two party system and media. This anti-union atmosphere will thus grow, and will soon affect all unions, much like high unemployment has already weakened all unions by pushing down wages and lowering union membership. And union membership is already drastically low: with 7 percent private sector unemployment, unions are already facing near extinction. The attack on the public sector, if successful, will completely destroy the power of unions in relation to the power of corporations. Labor’s diminishing clout is already recognized by politicians of both parties; indeed, the current attacks would not be happening if it were otherwise. Big business now has undisputed and complete control over both parties. The New York Times reports:

“The reality is that the U.S. labor movement has steadily lost influence, politically, socially and economically. Labor believes that President Barack Obama is taking it too much for granted; he is.” (March 7, 2011).

A recent member of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) International Executive Board, Stephen Lerner, was more blunt when he spoke at Pace University: “Unions are almost dead. We cannot survive doing what we do.”

It is in this context that solutions must be proposed, debated, and pursued. Labor unions do not need genius-caliber ideas or fancy gimmicks to save themselves; there are numerous practical, common sense solutions that could be implemented immediately. Below are six:

- 1) Go on the offensive. No struggle of any kind can be won on a purely defensive basis. Yet many labor unions seem content with continually fending off corporate attackers, taking steps backwards as they do so, since waging defensive campaigns uses precious union resources. Purely defensive campaigns imply weakness, since a powerful organization would choose to use its resources in a more empowering way. Concessionary bargaining is a prime example of unions not flexing their muscle, and sadly, it’s become the new norm for many unions, which weaken themselves further with every new concession-filled contract. The

union movement will not be able to grow significantly as long as it persists in concessionary bargaining. Who would want to join a union and pay dues if the results are progressively worse contracts?

Labor unions are capable of conjuring powerful social forces when they do go on the offensive. Oregon unions decided to mobilize in favor of a Tax the Rich and Corporation measure that would reduce the state deficit: union members flocked to phone banks and door-to-door canvassing, winning over the community with a landslide election victory that saved hundreds of millions of dollars in social service cuts. The events in Wisconsin proved that unions would have tremendous community support to go on the offensive against the anti-democracy Governor Walker. The non-union working class in Wisconsin correctly viewed the unions' fight as a battle against the status-quo, and they wanted to join.

2) Mobilize the community. One of the biggest mistakes unions have made over the years has been to disconnect themselves from the community. Unions became insular organizations unconcerned with organizing new members or fighting for working people in general, mistakes that can easily be remedied by reversing course. The media is focused on demonizing unions in the eyes of the broader working class, but unions can fight back by waging real campaigns to save Social Security, Medicare, or other national programs like food stamps, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Medicaid, and especially addressing unemployment. Fighting for the unemployed by demanding a public works program would boost the image of unions in the eyes of working people nationwide. The union movement cannot win by itself; it is too small. SEIU has recognized this in their fledgling campaign called Fight For a Fair Economy. But a truly successful campaign would require that all unions become involved.

3) Re-unite the labor movement. It is long overdue for the Change to Win unions and the AFL-CIO to reunite. The progressive vision of the Change to Win unions did not materialize; the labor movement as a whole is weaker because of this divide. New campaigns need to be organized on a national basis, with all unions directing their energy in a coordinated fashion. If the major unions all wage separate campaigns they are doomed to failure.

4) Political Independence. Union leaders should realize that the Democrats don't want to be friends anymore. How many betrayals must it take? The Democrats are attacking teachers' unions across the country on the state level with "education reforms" that disempower union seniority and create non-union charter schools. On the national level Obama's anti-union Race to the Top education reforms is a blatantly anti-union continuation of Bush's No Child Left Behind program. Democratic governors across the country are passing "cuts only" budgets at the expense of labor unions and working people while refusing to raise taxes on the rich or close corporate loopholes.

Some labor leaders refuse to mobilize their members against these attacks because union members were mobilized to campaign for these governors only months before! The same is true for President Obama, who received hundreds of millions of dollars from the unions for his election campaign and gave virtually nothing in return. Will Obama's new promises in 2012 fool labor leaders once again or will they engage in self-deception? Sadly, the nation's largest teachers union, the NEA, has pledged to support Obama's next campaign. It is terribly demoralizing for union members to watch the candidate they endorsed attack their wages and benefits. The electoral strategy has failed — miserably. Union resources can be used in a multitude of productive ways instead of funding their attackers' electoral

campaigns.

5) Powerful slogans. Union leaders cannot inspire their members to be active in boring campaigns or by using watered down demands. To win any campaign unions need to be able to mobilize their members and the community. This effort requires that unions re-learn how to agitate around important issues while proposing real solutions. The Great Recession is posing this question starkly before the labor movement: how will labor unions fight back against the powerful corporate offensive that was unleashed with the collapse of the economy? How will unions save their members' benefits while creating jobs for the community at large, when the media claims "there is no money?" Again, no radical solutions are needed. National Nurses United has already come up with the solution: make Wall Street pay! Tax the rich and corporations!

All the labor movement has to do is point to the historically high levels of income inequality and demand that the rich and corporations be taxed to pay for the recession that they caused. No other sector of society can afford to pay for this recession. Unions must point out that taxes on the rich have decreased dramatically over the past three decades, causing these massive deficits. A national campaign to tax the rich and corporations has the capacity to mobilize all working people so that the national and state budget deficits can be fixed — without slashing Social Security and Medicare — while a massive public works campaign can be started to create millions of jobs.

6) Take back the streets. None of the pressing social issues of most concern to working people can be addressed by politicians of the Democrat and Republican parties. We've entered a period where politics are being transferred to the streets, where politicians can only be influenced by the implied threat inherent in massive demonstrations, rallies, and mobilized communities. The power demonstrated in Wisconsin showed clearly the direction that labor unions need to go if they want to avoid extinction; the tactics of the last thirty years must be renounced and the strategies of the labor movement's birth must be reclaimed. The massive power that labor unions accumulated up through the 1940's by waging aggressive campaigns in the streets and workplaces was frittered away in consequent decades by union leaders content with making backroom deals with politicians. Labor can either be a friend or feared by the corporate elite, it can't be both.

The initiative to implement these common sense proposals must come first and foremost from rank and file members, since they have suffered the most from the current failed strategy and tactics adopted by top union officials. The rank and file must put unrelenting pressure on the officials to change course and begin to put up a real fight in defense of the membership. If the officials do not respond, then the rank and file can exercise their democratic rights and take appropriate action.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/07/us/07iht-letter07.html>

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