

War, Economic Crisis and the Role of Trade Unions

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If you're seeking an exciting career that's really fraught with risk and danger and that makes the world a better place, forget about joining the Army: become a labor organizer!

You'll be called upon to risk your job and your life and to face unjust jail terms for organizing on behalf of your fellow man and woman, with no way to fight back against thugs with guns and billy clubs except by using your wits. In today's recessionary world economy, with hundreds of millions of desperate unemployed workers who will cross picket lines to get a job, yours will be no easy task.

Let's compare the careers of Army officers and labor organizers to see which actually comes closer to fulfilling that wonderful slogan of the Army's: "Be all you can be."

Advertising in the August 26th issue of "The Miami Hurricane," the student newspaper of the University of Miami, a typical Army ad seeks to enroll students in the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) with glib generalities such as "Start Taking Charge," "Start Leading" and "Start Getting Ahead of the Game."

The ad promises ROTC leads to an Army Officer's commission after graduation and "With a start like that, there's no limit to what you can achieve."

What the ad doesn't say is that the Army fights at the direction of the White House and Congress—and they in recent years have given the Pentagon authority to gad about the globe forging ties with tyrants and making illegal invasions that disgrace USA in the eyes of the world, if not in the eyes of Army recruiters. Keep in mind, too, the Army pitch is all about you.

By contrast, a labor organizer works only to serve others. A recent help wanted ad posted on the Internet by the Service Employees International Union Local 105 of Denver, Colo., which includes many health care workers, called for an organizer who will "Train leaders to educate and agitate other workers about their job rights and other social issues, and motivate them into action." The ad says the organizer must have "A demonstrated commitment to social and economic justice." Army recruitment ads say nothing of the kind, of course. They stress "strength."

(Military pay, of course, doesn't begin to compete with the civilian sector. An attack plane pilot may earn \$40,000 a year or more, counting perks for battle zone duty, but a typical commercial airline pilot earns over \$100,000. A labor organizer is lucky to make \$35,000 to \$40,000 a year, but few are in it for the money.)

If you work in American-occupied Iraq, for example, you'll need lots of dedication. The

ministry in charge of electricity just barged into all the offices of the electrical union, turned out the lights, and shut them down. Nations like Colombia and Guatemala, with close ties to the U.S., have the worst records of all on workers' rights. Of course, it may all be just coincidence that wherever USA goes trade unions suffer.

In Colombia, where hunting season on trade unionists is open all year, Reuters quoted an International Labor Organization(ILO) official who said 96 per cent of the cases of violence against unionists there go unpunished. "In 2009 Colombia remains the most dangerous place on the face of this planet for workers," the wire service quoted Stanley Gacek, an American on an ILO committee concerned with such matters.

"The climate of fear fed by killings, abductions and other violence meant only 4 percent of Colombia's 18 million workers are union members, and only 1.2 percent have been able to negotiate their working conditions, according to Tarsicio Mora Godoy, president of the Colombia United Workers Federation CUT," Reuters said. Is that a situation that calls for improvement or not?

Globally, only one of 10 workers are unionized, so that of 2.8-billion employed, half are wage-slaves toiling for less than \$2 a day. With some few notable exceptions—South Africa, Spain, and Chile—union membership is in decline in most countries, including the U.S., U.K., Australia, New Zealand and Israel, the ILO finds.

The choice is clear: without unions, human beings will subsist in a world of wage-slavery, of "haves" and "have nots," rather than in a world where the average person has a chance at making a decent living. As Abraham Lincoln once observed, "Labor is the superior of capital, and deserves much the higher consideration." Nor should it be forgotten that the Rev. Martin Luther King gave his life helping the sanitation workers in Memphis.

This Labor Day, the choice is yours. Why not "be all you can be" by building a better world, not destroying it? Have you got what it takes?

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