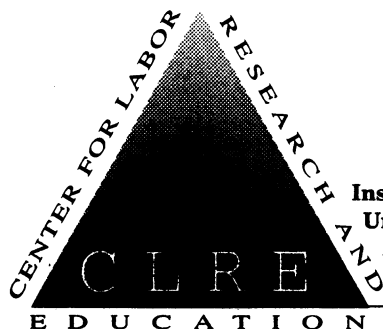


Lessons from the **Union-Management Partnerships** Task Force

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The Center for Labor Research and Education

is a component of the Institute of Industrial Relations, University of California, Berkeley. The Labor Center offers a variety of programs on labor policy issues. The Center provides training, publications, consultation to labor organizations, research, and holds conferences for academics, labor and management practitioners.

The viewpoints expressed in this report are those of the authors, and not necessarily those of the Labor Center, the Institute of Industrial Relations, or the University of California.

Lessons from the Union-Management Partnerships Task Force

*HOW PUBLIC SECTOR PARTNERSHIPS WORK
(AND DON'T WORK) AND SOME THOUGHTS ON
HOW TO IMPROVE THEM*

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Special thanks to Professor Emeritus George Strauss for his invaluable guidance to the Task Force and to Ezinda Franklin, Center for Labor Research and Education for her layout and design work.

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ABSTRACT

Lessons from the Union-Management Partnerships Task Force was a collaborative project of the Center for Labor Research and Education, Institute of Industrial Relations, University of California at Berkeley and a Task Force of labor and management practitioners who are engaged in public sector union-management partnerships (new models for bargaining and workplace change). The Task Force set out to learn about their own partnerships and to develop an understanding of some common partnership pitfalls and solutions. This document assumes that readers appreciate the need to change from old adversarial modes of bargaining and the potential benefits of partnerships. It also assumes that readers will bring their own experiences with bargaining relationships to this analysis.

Lessons from the Union-Management Partnership Task Force acknowledges that partnerships are complex processes which change and develop over time. There is no single partnership model which will address the infinitely variable dynamics in a bargaining relationship. Lessons strikes a balance between simplistic prescriptions for partnership behavior and case studies which depend on the unique circumstances of that partnership. Lessons from the Union-Management Partnership Task Force invites readers to analyze their own unique bargaining situations using the lessons and examples from Task Force partnerships. ▲

INTRODUCTION

The Union-Management Partnerships Task Force convened in July 1996 to discuss the problems and successes that labor and management representatives and neutral facilitators were experiencing in their own partnerships. The Task Force practitioners came from public agencies, each engaged in a different type of partnership. The facilitators came with experiences in both private and public sector partnerships. The academic members of the Task Force have researched and written about public and private sector partnership models in the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Europe and South Africa. The Task Force did not consider or write about employee-involvement programs in unrepresented workforces because the inherent imbalance between unrepresented employees and management is not easily overcome and an analysis of the potential benefits to these programs is beyond the scope of the Task Force's work.

The Task Force established four goals:

1. To learn from the experiences of labor and management practitioners who are involved in union-management partnerships
2. To learn from academic research on union-management partnerships
3. To learn how to analyze their own union-management partnership problems and successes
4. To develop some lessons for labor and management practitioners who are not part of the Task Force.

Over eight months of meetings, the Task Force developed a methodology for accomplishing their goals. During this time, the participants explored their own case studies. The presentations by practitioners were followed by discussions by Task Force participants about the common problems and actual as well as proposed solutions. In these discussions, the faculty, facilitators

and graduate students contributed insights from academic research and other reported case studies from outside the Task Force.

The Task Force developed a common language for talking about their partnerships. The members of the Task Force also developed sufficient familiarity with each others' partnerships so that conclusions about problems and solutions could be discussed by all members of the Task Force, even though all members were not personally involved.

Drawing on the experiences of the Task Force, Kirsten Snow Spalding and Dennis Toseland developed a flexible framework for discussing some of the common problems. The categories of "stakeholders, trust, communication, power, and goals", which are used in this pamphlet, provide a flexible discussion and analysis framework—a way to group together particular experiences with the goal of drawing some general lessons. The categories used may also provide a "benchmarking" system through which readers can analyze their own experiences and compare them to ideal partnerships and to the experience of other existing partnerships.

The issues of "stakeholders, trust, communication, power and goals" are intimately interrelated. For example, a particular partnership cannot discuss its new workplace communication systems without noting that the new communication systems will impact the trust relationships between the stakeholders.

This document cannot begin answer all of the problems that public sector partnership practitioners are experiencing. The Task Force make no attempt to give prescriptions for how to set up successful union-management partnerships. The Task Force share their own collective experience and offer some thoughts on how other practitioners and academics may avoid these particular failures, experiment with some successful partnership strategies and use this framework to analyze their own partnerships as they develop over time.

In each of the sections that follow, the Task Force will attempt to lay out an analytical framework, give some stories that illustrate particular experiences, draw some common lessons from these stories and suggest how others may be able to think through their own problems in these areas. ▲

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE FIELD OF UNION-MANAGEMENT PARTNERSHIPS

Government institutions are feeling pressure to undertake innovations in their work systems due to a two decade trend of increasing privatization and general government cost scrutiny. At the same time, persistent anxieties and unfavorable perceptions of the labor market create strong incentives for employees and their representatives to participate in innovations to improve agency performance. Unions are interested in organizational change because of their need to develop new strategies for representing the interests of workers in an era where emphasis has shifted from wage bargaining to job saving.

In the 1990's a new vision of what makes a successful production system has come to dominate management literature. It is one of the "high-performance" workplace, whose blueprint has grown out of strategies such as total quality management (TQM) and self-managed, team-based production. These work system improvements aim to reduce the alienation, increase the commitment, and make better use of the intelligence and skills of the workforce in order to improve efficiency in the workplace. These models of workplace organization have not only been evident in the private sector, but have begun to fundamentally influence the operation of government, with politicians and employees seeking the same efficiencies and improved quality of worklife as their industry counterparts.

The theoretical literature has led to a proliferation of experiments in work systems changes across a wide range of companies and industries. While only a few workplaces have achieved and maintained major transformations, a larger number of establishments have implemented at least some kind of organizational change. Unions have to begin to bargain for a hand in making these changes to ensure that the workers will benefit from the new work systems and that organized labor may use these changes to achieve larger social and economic goals.

Union-management partnerships (UMPs) are often concurrent changes in bargaining relationships and changes in work organization. Many agencies are starting from a traditional labor relations model that has the following characteristics: regu-

lated confrontation between management and employees, “thinly veiled threats of force” in which unequal power of one side creates domination of the other with the weaker party looking for a way to avoid the coerced bargain, and agreements which are often unsatisfactory compromises. (Bodine 1996). UMPs are different from simple employee involvement schemes (although they may include some employee involvement) in that they are aiming to create a different dynamic between the union, workers and management. The partnerships involve the unions in the process of changing bargaining relations and work organization, whereas most employee involvement schemes focus on getting employee input but leave the decisions in management’s hand.

What are the different forms of partnerships?

There are two levels of partnering. In practice, partnerships will include a mix of these two levels. The first is improved union-management bargaining relations and the second is characterized by more extensive workplace changes with union participation in decision making. It is necessary to have improved union-management bargaining relations in order to have viable, shared decision making partnerships.

Improved Union-Management Bargaining Relations

Improved union-management bargaining relations can take the form of either formal or informal schemes.

One formal improvement in union-management relations is joint training to improve bargaining effectiveness. Both parties are trained to use “win-win” or “interest based” bargaining techniques. The characteristic of these programs is that they explicitly acknowledge that all the stakeholders in an organization get something out of the relationship and in the course of bargaining the workplace community as a whole defines its common purpose—its mission and vision. Furthermore, the parties learn to recognize the workplace as an interdependent community that is organized around a common purpose of providing a set of services, while meeting the economic and other needs of its stakeholders—a group that includes unions,

management, elected officials, and workers. Finally, the improved bargaining process does not promote one group winning at the expense of the other. Instead, each party understands that mutual gains are to be had and the focus is on deciding how the parties are to go about realizing these gains.

Another formal improvement in bargaining relationships is to create contracts which are not multiple year, static agreements but are instead “living documents”. Regular meetings are held during the term of the contract to review how it is working out and provisions may be revised at any time. However, living contracts are not “re-openers” in the traditional adversarial mode which can lead to parties monitoring their power base and calling for advantageous changes to the contract at the moment when they have the power to achieve the change. Instead, living contracts present opportunities for experimentation and flexibility without the danger of mid-contract take-aways.

Informal improvements in bargaining relations may include less adversarial bargaining style, more exchange of information, or improved grievance procedures. These informal relationship changes may arise from a change to management that is more worker friendly or a new union leader who has a positive history with management or from other factors. Moreover, it is possible that informal improvements may signal a change in the workplace culture and lead, as time passes, to more formal changes.

Semi-Autonomous Worker Teams

In practice, there are many variations of union participation in workplace changes. However, most of these forms can be categorized within the models of semi-autonomous worker teams or representative union-management committees. Either category may wield decision making power and/or have recommendation authority.

Consultative worker teams with power to recommend, but not to decide include: quality circles, employee involvement programs, and Total Quality Management (TQM). In these examples, workers speak about their own work experience and generally offer production or service improvement suggestions. Topics dealt with include: productivity improvement (Kaisen), flextime, equipment design, production scheduling, product design, quality, safety, training, performance appraisal, supervisor selection, supplier relations, and customer relations.

These involvement structures tend to be parallel structures to traditional management control. The worker teams may or may not involve all workers in a particular service or production process, and may or may not be linked to union structures. The key is that the workers who participate give workplace improvement suggestions based on their work experience, but their suggestions do not necessarily represent the consensus of the other workers or the input of the union. However, if there is only the appearance of participation and the worker team suggestions are ignored, then there is no real two-way communication. The disappointment of employees who were promised a real voice can reduce worker morale and create resentment.

Decision-making worker teams with power to recommend and decide give workers some power about their work environment. Decisions are made over substantive issues and may be made without management approval or they may take place in joint union-management decision-making bodies. These teams or semi-autonomous work groups may consider any topics within the control of the worker team.

It should be noted that there are several potential difficulties with these teams. Decision making teams are limited by the firm or agency constraints outside their control. For example, the worker team cannot make decisions about product lines or new services, cannot allocate resources or make marketing decisions if these decisions are reserved to

management or to a joint union-management committee. In addition, teams can create worker to worker coercion or management by stress (Parker and Slaughter 1991). Furthermore, management can undermine these teams by reserving veto power over the team decisions. Finally, if the worker teams are not linked to union structures, they can be seen as a threat to union officials' control over workplace issues.

At their best, decision-making teams can be positive for top management, because the team structure allows them to streamline operations and positive for workers because it gives them a voice. If one union goal is greater worker participation in workplace issues, the teams may build the strength of the union.

Representative participation

Representative participation gives workers a voice in the governance of the firm. Workers (or union reps) speak for their fellow workers (unlike the consultative teams or decision-making teams discussed above). In these programs, unions play a critical role in selecting representatives and holding them accountable to the body of workers.

Issue orientated joint committees may be either consultative or have decision-making authority over their designated issues. Joint committee topics include: productivity, safety, quality, training, employee assistance, substance abuse, workplace amenities (parking, cafeteria, etc.), family and child care issues or benefits.

Representative joint committees may also undertake agency or organization-wide workplace changes. In these committees, worker representatives and management representatives may undertake new service or product design, budgeting, marketing, hiring and layoff policies or any other issue traditionally reserved as management prerogative. These committees may also be either consultative or decision making.

Employee/union representation on company boards of directors is relatively common in Europe and Australia, but not often seen in the United States since it presumes a complete power share and goes against the prevailing notions of what the institutions of a firm and a union should look like. In the public sector, agency boards may sometimes have a union representative who was either elected or appointed by a politician.

Another form of partnership is the **financial/ownership partnership** which may include employee stock option plans (ESOPs), other forms of institutional investment, profit sharing, and performance incentives (e.g. Scanlon Plan). If the only union-management partnership element is a financial agreement, then this is not a substantial advance over the traditional bargaining relationship.

Hybrids and Combinations of Partnership Types

In advanced partnerships, there may be a combination of worker team structures and representative committees. These structures do not usually replace collective bargaining. There is still a place for contract negotiations over wages and working conditions and for contracts which will define the parameters for workplace change. While there may be considerable overlap between the contract issues and the issues raised in joint committees and worker teams, the parallel structures should create a synergy of better bargaining relationships and better workplace decision making.

This panoply of relationship and workplace change models are collectively referred to as “partnerships”. In each of the following sections, the Task Force will begin to analyze their particular experiences, outline some general findings, and illustrate the points with some specific examples. These general findings may not be applicable in every type of partnership, but may raise important issues in different forms for other partnership models. It is the hope that in the sections that follow, union and management representatives will find not only lessons and examples that match their own experiences, but also may find new ways of analyzing their own experiences to broaden the collective understanding of partnerships. ▲

STAKEHOLDERS

Partnerships have the potential to succeed or fail because of the particular characteristics of the partnership actors, the “stakeholders”. The stakeholders have differing needs, concerns, and goals. They have different methods and styles which impact the viability of the partnership. Their traits and personalities are what makes each partnership unique. Stakeholders’ interests need to be identified (and met) or there will be a disincentive for a particular stakeholder to continue to be involved in the partnership process. It is important to identify where there are common goals and where there are different goals, which, however, can be met simultaneously.

The Stakeholders (or Cast of Characters)

Union: Not only is the union a stakeholder in its representative capacity, but it is also a stakeholder with independent interests. If there is more than one union engaged in the partnership, the power dynamics are very different and less stable than that of a one union partnership. The existence of another union means that the employee voice is likely to be less coherent, unless the unions make a special effort to coordinate between themselves. A partnership which involves multiple unions is often a change from previous practice where each union deals with management individually. Each union has unilateral power and does not often think of how to coordinate this power.

In two of the Task Force partnerships, there exists more than one union. In each of these cases the different unions have had differing agendas for what they want out of a partnership. In neither case did they fully work out a common agenda with which to face management, which diluted the focus of the partnership. It is interesting that in each case there was one union that strongly supported the partnership and another that did not. The lack of support from the companion union has made it difficult for the unions favoring partnerships to continue partnership efforts, since management wants to deal with the entire labor force at one time.

Management: Note that the stakeholders include not only the CEO's but also mid-level managers and administrators. Therefore, although management appears to speak with only one voice at the bargaining table, it is made up of constituent parts. Mid-level managers are often the most threatened employees in partnerships that involve semi-autonomous worker teams, or other forms of workplace restructuring. If their needs and fears are not dealt with they can impede the partnership process.

Non-represented groups: In a partnership which seeks to completely restructure a workplace, the unrepresented employees have interests which will impact the partnership. In self-managed work teams they will have a direct voice, but in joint union-management committees their positions must be represented by management if they are unrepresented because they are confidential employees or in another unrepresented unit or by the union if they are "agency fee payers" in the bargaining unit but not members of the union.

The Politicians: In the public sector, management may or may not speak for the Board of Directors or the City Council or other executives. Partnerships will operate differently depending on whether the political body is one of the major movers behind the partnership or is in a more passive role. It is important to note that while the union and management are engaged in the actual partnership formation they are also getting support, encouragement, and or negative directives from the governing body.

In one partnership, the governing body has consistently been very supportive of the workplace changes and has made sure the stakeholders have enough resources to build a strong partnership. In another, the fluid political environment has led to insufficient upper level management commitment and sustained support for the process, although the mandate for the partnership came from management. In each case the governing body's level of commitment to the partnership has impacted the commitment of the other stakeholders to create and maintain a partnership.

Stakeholder Impact on the Partnership Start-up

The methods, style and personality of the stakeholders play into the partnerships, particularly in the start-up or transitional phase. At this point, a partnership is trying to develop a new corporate culture and overcome ingrained personal relationships that are based on traditional hierarchical power. In the moves away from the traditional bargaining model, the parties must find new ways of communicating with one another. The change in communication and in the bargaining relationship is facilitated by the use of new formal structures such as, communication guidelines, committees with rotating chairpersons, new electronic or voice mail systems, shared minutes of joint committee meetings, all of which reinforce the new ways.

In one Task Force partnership, the local union engaged in the partnership assigned a new business agent to the agency. The new business agent's personal style of communicating was more adversarial than the former business agent's. Her style developed outside this new partnership culture. Fortunately, the partnership process was far enough along that the union members knew how they wanted to interact with management and were able to successfully convince the business agent to modify her style of communication in a way that better fit with the new partnership culture .

Selection of Issues

How do the stakeholders influence the selection of issues to be addressed by the partnership? If prior interactions between the parties were bad, or if strength is unequal, then trust needs to be built before a full panoply of issues can be undertaken outside the constraints of a traditional collective bargaining agreement. Thus, if there are major conflicts left over from previous regime they should be resolved at the outset, not swept under the rug. On the other hand, if the partnerships are functioning well on limited issues, then the stakeholders may wish to expand the scope of the partnership.

In one partnership, the history of bargaining interactions had eroded the trust and the level of commit-

ment that the stakeholders could bring to the partnership. The stakeholders started with substantive goals of implementing broad sweeping changes, but lack of trust made its hard to get anything concrete off the ground. In this case it might be better if the partners start with a relatively small and circumscribed arena for partnership activities, in order to build trust, and then think about more general change.

Leadership

Strong, committed leadership is critical to getting a partnership off the ground. The leaders must be advocating the new relationship, creating a culture of openness to change, helping to define the vision for the partnership, generating and renewing commitment. At the same time as a partnership is working to decentralize power (at least around partnership issues), the leaders from management and the union may provide a rallying cry for commitment to the partnership process so that individuals will refrain from jumping ship when the going gets tough.

Leaders from all stakeholders play an important role in reminding the stakeholders that the inevitable obstacles are challenges which can be overcome by the partnership process, not reasons to quit. In the partnership process many of the successes will be built on the input and talent of individuals. However, it is important to refrain from developing a cult of personality. A concentration of partnership power in a particular individual is too much like the old system, in which the CEO's or union leaders may call the shots without input from their constituencies. To minimize individual power more people should be engaged in the collaborative efforts.

When the general manager of one agency was hired, he was intent on starting a partnership. It took him some time to establish the trust of the stakeholders that he was after a true decision-making partnership, but his personality and honesty in advocating and implementing meaningful change helped the other stakeholders realize that there could be positive change in the organization. When faced with a privatization crisis he was able to convince the

stakeholders that they should embark on a full scale project of work restructuring and partnership building. An outside union official pointed out that this situation had elements of a cult of personality. Everyone agreed to make efforts to decentralize the locus of vision within the partnership, to create a more universal vision of what the partnership would be. Even with this broadening of the focus, the commitment of the general manager to the partnership process was important in assuaging the fears about what the work restructuring meant for individuals jobs.▲

POWER IN PARTNERSHIPS

The power of the stakeholders sets the climate for the partnership. As in any bargaining relationship, parties in a partnership act according to their strength and their perceptions of the other party's strength in each situation.

The Complicated Power Dynamic in the Public Sector

In public sector partnerships there are at least three power bases—the union, agency management and elected officials. (Sometimes there may also be an independent power base in the union membership or in a citizen action group.) Unlike private sector partnerships where the management and the union generally interact directly, in an agency, a union may have political influence or the agency management and the politicians may have different goals for the partnership.

In one City partnership, the local County government is bidding to take over some city services. The City Council is considering the bid while the City Manager and the union are working together to protect city jobs and services. The union's political clout may influence the outcome of the County's bid, or the City Manager's relationship with the Council may come into play.

How is Power Balanced?

It is tempting to say that for the partnership process to work parties must have equal power. But, there is never perfect trust or a perfectly equal power at any given moment. Partnerships are an ongoing process with a balance of power developing over time. This balance is something which must be worked for and constantly reevaluated within the partnership.

Real decision-making partnerships require balance, where both sides have meaningful input into, and control over, the areas covered under the partnership. Each stakeholder must be engaged in the partnership as an equal; otherwise the partnership will be seen as a paternalistic program. Even in consultative

partnerships, if the consultation is going to be meaningful, there must be moves towards a balance of the power between the consultative group (either the work team or the representative group) and management.

“Labor-management change efforts cannot succeed over the long haul if they are imposed on a group by unilateral decision of any party” (Walden 1995). To understand how partnerships work, we need to consider the relative power of the parties entering into the partnership and how the partnership fosters the parties’ balance of power.

The nature of power relations changes when people move from adversarial to non-adversarial bargaining. In the initial phases of the partnership, while the relationship is metamorphosing from adversarial to non-adversarial, relative power is a very important consideration, because it will be used to influence the design of the system. If power is relinquished here or used too strongly, it can have negative consequences for the partnership.

Types of Power in Partnerships

There are essentially two types of power in partnerships. First, is each stakeholder’s intrinsic power. Second, there is the power to control or make changes in the workplace; this is power that can shift, be shared or monopolized. As stakeholders attempt to evaluate ongoing partnerships or evaluate their relative strengths before entering into partnerships, they must think about both types of power, the power they have and the power that they may find as a consequence of partnering.

Stakeholders’ Intrinsic Power

A party has intrinsic power in its constituency’s ability to unilaterally control the workplace. The union, through its members, has the power to determine the production or service in an operation. Thus, if workers slow down or stop working, they have exercised their power over this workplace. In addition, in the public sector, the union can play a role in determining who the employers are, by influencing the political election process. Management has the power to fire, allocate resources, and control the hierarchical operations of the workplace.

In new partnerships, the parties should acknowledge this intrinsic power system that exists in all workplaces. Once the power structures are acknowledged and more fully understood on both sides, it becomes possible to give up or share power in an honest and open way.

As one human relations manager put it: "The union had no idea how much power it had until the union members disagreed with the union leadership about how to act in the partnership." Then suddenly, the union realized that its membership could derail the whole process.

In public agency partnership, the union has a power base of its own outside of the partnership.

For example, the union may have access to politicians who influence a public sector employer or it may be able to mobilize a community constituency through the broader labor movement to affect agency policy. Management can make decisions, but it needs the union if it is going to implement real changes.

Power of Control

In traditional or hierarchical models, unions have power over job classifications and management cannot change job functions without bargaining with the union. This control balances management power. When the union begins to partner with management, it may give up control over whether a worker's tasks go beyond the worker's classification. In so doing, the union will assume joint responsibility with management for the success of the agency and the environment of the workplace. Consequently, the union's role may change from fighting for union member's rights to advocating for responsible workplace management for the benefit of all workers. At the same time, management's role changes from directing the work within union rules to working with the union to empower the workers in their jobs.

Finding Sources of Strength In the Workplace

Defining Roles

The parties should define their roles early in the process. Each party considers their part in: consultant selection, joint committee structures, design and delivery of training, communication and information sharing, layoffs or job reclassifications, the nature of participation by workers, evaluation of the partnership process, and establishment of new compensation systems. The stakeholders should work together to determine what type of partnership model best meets their process and substantive goals. Furthermore, the strong partner is not the stakeholder who grabs workplace control, but rather the stakeholder who has found the right balance to make the workplace function well.

Power Imbalances

If the union is weak or not well connected with its members or management leaders do not have the buy-in of all levels of management, then to avoid co-option the union and management may agree to start with single issue partnerships or limited scope partnerships over specific areas. Successful partnerships on defined issues can set the stage for greater membership involvement and for understanding the difficulties that will be encountered in a broader partnership.

For example, a joint health and safety committee may work, even though the union is not “powerful” enough to balance management in a global workplace restructuring partnership. In one Task Force partnership, a single department of an agency successfully developed an internship program that allowed employees to train into other jobs without losing their positions. This success paved the way for an expanded partnership agency wide.

If one party is relatively weak, then it may be able to build its power through the partnership by sharing the strength of some of the other stakeholders or coordinating efforts with other stake-

holders in a way that benefits everyone in the partnership. This is much like coordinated bargaining, but it takes place within the teams or representative committees of the partnership.

For example, in a workplace with multiple unions, some of the unions may be relatively weak because they represent fewer members. Through a joint committee structure which involves all unions, the relatively weaker union may have more impact on issues affecting that union's members than that union would have if it were addressing its issues alone at the bargaining table.

Shifting Traditional Management Power to Tap New Sources of Power

In a real partnership, management will give some power to the workers and the union in order to elicit cooperation and flexibility from the union towards obtaining the goals of the enterprise. Management has given up power to gain power. In hierarchical workplace relations it may have been that workers' knowledge, talents, and skills were not fully realized. By channeling worker talents, power is added to the system, not just shifted from management to the workers.

In one partnership an agency and the union created a self-supervised semi-autonomous mail room. The management understood that mail services were inefficient but that the union and the mail room workers had the power to change that operation if the workers saw that it was in their interest to do so. Management gave up its authority to get the greater efficiency of the worker controlled operation. Management monitored the efficiency by simply keeping track of customer complaints, which dropped substantially. The union and its members became responsible for making sure that the mail actually got out.

While management appears to have control because it has the power to hire and fire workers, the union has unofficial power because a manager cannot make many workplace changes with-

out the support and cooperation of the workforce. In a well functioning decision-making partnership, the union's power becomes legitimized in areas where it has been unofficial. With the union's control over some decision-making comes the headaches of ramifications of these decisions.

In one agency's union-management partnership committee the union argued strongly for the creation of a safety specialist position. With the moves to contain costs in the agency and maintain adherence to an operating budget, the union had to take responsibility for establishing this position within the confines of the budget and without hiring new personnel. Under the old hierarchical system, the union might not have considered the cost of their desired solution, but now understood the kind of skills required would have to be those limited to the current workforce (or could be acquired through training) i.e., the safety specialist would not be a safety engineer.

Building Union Strength and Combating Cooption

Partnerships can build union strength by involving union members in the partnership process. If the workers have goals for changing their workplace, and the union, through the partnership, provides a structure within which to achieve those goals, then members will become more closely aligned with the union's institutional goals. Through greater involvement of its members in the processes of the organization, the union serves as a focus for the power of its members by organizing it and maintaining clear goals and vision of what the partnership will bring to the workers.

When the union becomes involved in positive workplace change rather than being in opposition to management, the union can direct more of its resources to serving the needs of the members mid-contract, rather than waiting for, bargaining, or fighting through the grievance procedure. More generally, union strength is built when it takes an active role in workplace issues rather than its role in the adversarial model where the union generally reacts to management changes or proposals for change. In

partnerships, events in the workplace can be determined by what the workers want rather than what they dislike or will put up with. Finally, through partnerships the unions may be able to alter structures which take power away from the workers and give it to management.

For example, a union may be able to give workers greater autonomy and scheduling flexibility by agreeing to a self-directed work team, whereas under a hierarchical model, scheduling would have been controlled by a contract.

Dangers In The Shifting Power Game

Blurring Roles

If the union takes on some management functions, it may be difficult to maintain the separate union identity that it requires to represent the needs of the workforce and workers may be concerned that a union has been co-opted by management in new “cooperation” ventures. On the other hand, if the partnership does not allow for a strong union role in the new relationship, and becomes instead an employee involvement scheme, the partnership can intensify worker identification with the employer and weaken identification with the union. If things are going well and management interests and workers interests are convergent, then there may seem to be little need for the union.

If union members become directly involved in the partnership process, and as a result the union loses some measure of oversight and/or control over the process, there may be actions taken by individual employees that are not coordinated or are not really in the best interest of the entire workforce or the union. The representatives to the partnership committee often speak as representatives of constituent groups rather than as individuals. However, in partnerships involving worker teams, union leadership and management must permit lower level autonomy to truly involve workers in the overall process of the partnership.

There are some participation programs that do not truly benefit the workers and also some that do not benefit management. For example, a weak union could agree to a partnership that elicits increased employee output, but does not give em-

ployees anything in return. In addition, some semi-autonomous work teams require that workers take on discipline of other team members. Systems such as these divide union membership (Parker and Slaughter 1991).

From management's perspective, there is the danger of giving up control of a work process to a worker team or a decision-making process to a joint committee and then finding that recalcitrant workers are not meeting the service goals or that the joint committee cannot address management's objectives.

Of particular concern in the public sector, agency management may be perceived as too closely aligned with the union's agenda and may face pressure from the politicians to protect the agency's goals from the realm of the partnership. ▲

PARTNERSHIP GOALS

There are good reasons for both union representatives and management to want to form partnerships. What is important is that the parties articulate these reasons.

But, union and management representatives enter partnerships with some different and some shared goals. Shared goals are the glue of the partnership—they provide a focus and a potential reason for commitment to the partnership process. Goals which are different can be met simultaneously as long as the parties jointly establish a shared vision of the process of partnering.

There are two main types of goals: the first are **process goals** and the second are **substantive goals**. Process goals are the new committees, team structures or bargaining techniques by which the substantive goals are to be achieved. A major reason for exploring new processes is that many of the new substantive goals simply could not be achieved using the traditional process.

Examples of process goals are: the union wants more employee input into job design and scheduling or the management wants to set up procedures to deal with problems at the lowest possible level and thus reduce the number of formal grievances. Shared process goals might include the use of interest based bargaining to settle the collective bargaining agreement or the establishment of a joint health and safety committee with the power to implement workplaces safety changes after consultation with the general manager.

Some examples of substantive goals are: a union goal of building membership, a management goal of reducing service turnaround time, or a shared goal of providing childcare to answer member concerns and decrease employee tardiness. When the parties have differing substantive goals, they may be pursued simultaneously and without conflict only as long as the process goals have been reconciled. Establishing a shared vision of the process of partnering is essential to achieving any substantive goals. Without a shared vision of the process, it is impossible to get the commitment of both parties and their respective constituents to the “partnership” because it will not be clear what the “partnership” is.

For example, if the union wants to strengthen its members' involvement in management structures

and simultaneously to strengthen the union structures, but management does not want to share supervisory power and merely wants to change the level of animosity in bargaining, then a workplace restructuring partnership is probably ill-advised.

Setting Goals

To build commitment to the partnership, the parties must articulate both their process and substantive goals at the outset, both at the partnership meetings and among the constituents of each group. Spelling the goals out verbally and in writing will allow the stakeholders to see what goals are common and which are different. In addition, the process of setting the joint vision of the partnership with all constituencies will set the stage for the ongoing work of the partnership.

There may be differing levels of importance assigned by each of the shareholders to their separate or shared substantive goals. These different perspectives on the objectives can be accommodated by the partnership team or joint committee work.

For example, when discussing the shared goal of increasing productivity, management may be more focused on overall cost reductions, and while the union also cares about efficiency gains, it is because the union wants to make the existing jobs more secure. If the parties achieve the increased productivity goal, the union's goal will also be met.

The urgency of the substantive goals may impact the success of the partnership. If one party is facing an immediate need for a workplace change, that party may be more committed to the process and more willing to make changes in the bargaining relationship. However, if the other party's goals are not clear or pressing, an unequal partnership may result or coming to agreement about the process goals may be more difficult.

One agency saw an increasing threat of privatization in their industry. The agency management presented the union with this urgent problem and the two sides agreed to form a partnership for the purpose of completely restructuring the

agency. In this case, there had been a prior attempt at a union-management partnership, but it had languished. This new, more urgent motivation appears to be keeping the parties working together to make the agency “competitive” with private sector alternatives.

A union-management partnership is an ongoing relationship. In cases where the parties initially cannot reach agreement about the partnership process (for example one side wants a consultative committee and the other wants semi-autonomous work teams), the parties should find some level of shared partnership process and start there with the understanding that the process can change or grow over time as the parties develop trust and a new vision of what is possible through the partnership.

An example of small scale partnership might be that in the collective bargaining agreement the parties do not to bargain for a particular training program, but instead provide that a union-management committee will develop a training plan which will be implemented as long as it costs no more than X% of the total wages.

Changing Goals

Over the course of a partnership, the parties should continuously reexamine their substantive goals and create benchmarks for determining how these goals are being met. As stakeholders begin to learn more about partnerships through experience and education and begin to see new possibilities for what their partnership can be, they may find that their substantive and their process goals are changing. Furthermore, stakeholders may meet an initial goal of the partnership and consequently have new energy to develop further goals.

If the initial process goals or substantive goals must be redefined, this should happen not only at the partnership table, but also within the parties' constituencies. For, changing goals or attempting to add new ones can radically change the nature of the partnership. Sometimes this results in a growth of the partnership's original scope and depth; other times, it is a more

fundamental shift in the underlying paradigm guiding the partnership.

In one Task Force example, a partnership was initiated by a City Council which sought to improve the relationship between the City Manager and the employees. The union's main goal at the outset of the partnership was to stop management from being abusive and creating a difficult working environment. Over the course of several years, the bargaining relationships between the union and management improved (in part because the City Manager who was a problem left). The City Council met its goals and management was pleased with the bargaining relationship that developed with the union. But now, the union's process goals have expanded beyond better relations to increasing work group autonomy. In some departments, the City is reluctant to move towards real power sharing over management decisions.

Forces Outside the Partnership

Both the process and the substantive goals of the bargaining parties will be influenced by the other stakeholders. The general climate within which the partnership is initiated and functions will determine the initial goals and the potential for growth and change.

A unique feature of public sector partnerships is that elected officials who govern the agency may have their own political goals for the partnership or for the agency. Therefore, management and union leaders must keep these political goals in mind and may have to make decisions about the form or substance of the partnership in response to these complex agendas. In some agencies, elected officials take part in partnership training, developing the mission statements or setting up the partnership structures. In other agencies, the management and union partners may decide to involve the political players only marginally.

When one agency and its union formed a partnership to restructure the agency and combat a privatization threat, it reported to its governing

Board merely that the parties were working together to make the agency more efficient. The agency's general manager is highly trusted by the Board and so the Board is satisfied to hear reports on the progress of the partnership without getting involved in very many of the partnership decisions. The agency management and the union agree that asking for the support of the Board for some of the sweeping changes that the partnership is making is good politics, but actually involving the Board in the partnership workplace change process could potentially undermine the trust that is being built between management and the union.

The political players must support the process goals of the partnership for it to succeed.

For example, the Board must understand that the partnership will be a change from adversarial bargaining. Without this understanding, the Board could derail the partnership by refusing to ratify a contract achieved through an interest based bargaining process.▲

TRUST IN PARTNERSHIPS

“Who cares about trust? Isn’t it all about who’s got the power?”

Union leaders and managers need trust when they enter into a new bargaining and/or decision-making process where there are fewer contractual rules than the old adversarial models. To negotiate these new relationships without detailed rules requires trust—trust not only between individuals, but also trust in this partnership process. However, it is important to realize that some level of trust between the parties existed before the partnership. It was necessary to get the work done. But it takes even greater levels of trust to make changes in the workplace without resorting to a traditional power structure of “management rights” and the threat of strikes to resolve bargaining demands.

Trust is built as the parties deal with specific issues. Real trust not only resolves immediate issues, but also lays the foundation for resolving other issues. It does this by creating an environment where stakeholders are able to really talk to each other instead of merely talking past one another and interacting in a ritualistic fashion. For a successful partnering, the parties need: 1) trust that the partnership process will work even though on a particular issue there might be reasons to revert to adversarial relations, 2) trust that neither side will abuse their power and 3) trust that the parties will communicate fully and honestly.

Trust In The Partnership Process

Explicitly developing joint process goals and mutually compatible substantive goals is important so that parties can refer back to a document outlining the common purpose of the partnership. This helps to bring any potential conflicts out into the open where they can be dealt with in a forthright manner.

In one Task Force example, the union sought to establish autonomous workgroups and reduce the number of middle management. Management wanted to improve the relations in a particular department, but was resistant to a loss of any

management control. The parties are distrustful because of the perceived difference in their process goals, even though on a particular issue, like work scheduling, their substantive goals may be closely aligned.

When partnerships clearly articulate their process goals, they are setting out a method for achieving changes, but are not laying out rules that will determine the substance of the change.

For example, if the parties establish a joint health and safety committee with decision-making authority, they are setting in motion a process, but they cannot foresee the outcome of any particular safety issue that comes up during the life of the contract.

By creating this process that will govern the relationship, but not lock in the expression of the terms of the relationship, each party feels more vulnerable to the unilateral exercise of power by the other. This feeling of vulnerability may lead to distrustful behavior.

Commitment

Commitment to the partnership process, whether that process is joint grievance or problem solving or a team making workplace decisions, validates its legitimacy to all the stakeholders and their constituents. Without this buy-in, the parties are likely to revert to old models or engage in escalating distrustful behavior when difficult issues arise. Underlying commitment to the process is the belief that if a particular workplace change does not work out, the partnership process will lead to another more successful change.

When the largest union in an agency pulled out of the partnership, the remaining unions and management struggled to renew a commitment to the process on the part of the Board and the employees in the other bargaining units. The partnership will continue to face challenges because any mutual gains can be derailed by either the Board of Directors or the absentee union.

Shared Values

The parties need to trust not only the new bargaining process, but really trust that their partner shares with them a new value system. The parties must believe that in their dealing with one another, the other will behave in accordance with their stated objectives and their new behavioral rules. In order to focus on the difficulties that naturally arise in the formation of a partnership, there needs to be an underlying trust in the motives of the other players and a feeling that they are indeed doing their best in working towards a partnership that will benefit all of the stakeholders. In this light, mistakes are simply mistakes, another step in the ongoing learning process.

In one example, at a joint meeting between union officials and management, the management representative admitted that he was not empowered to release committee members from their jobs for the purpose of preparing for bargaining meetings even though in prior bargaining situations the committee members had received release time. The mistake (of not getting authority to make decisions from this manager's superiors) led the union representatives to feel slighted. They did not have enough trust in management's motives or their respect towards the union to accept this situation as part of the learning process. The union made a strong point by unilaterally ending the joint meeting.

In another organization, in which the parties trusted one another's motives and trusted the partnership process, a mid-level manager made some insensitive remarks about an issue raised by the union. The union was upset, but did not hold up the partnership process because union leaders trusted that the mistake would be resolved within management. The management team viewed this individual's insensitive remarks as a serious breach of the rules of conduct, but also as a mistake that was part of the process of changing the culture of management.

Thus, while it was unfortunate, it was just another adjustment that had to be made.

Breaching Trust

When a party engages in behavior which is contrary to the spirit of the partnership process or takes advantage of a process to achieve its own goals unfairly, the other parties will respond to this breach of trust. A common response of the offended party is the withdrawal of its cooperation. This is not necessarily the end of the partnership; the “tit for tat” cycle of distrust can be broken by actions which warrant the trust of the other party.

In one organization the management was very vocal in supporting its partnership and trying to use new language appropriate to the partnership. However, the underlying structures of the organization underwent no substantial change and things appeared to the union to be pretty much business as usual. The union became distrustful of management’s motives, when there were no concrete efforts to back up the talk. The union became reticent to take on any project without strong guarantees that union objectives would be met.

Trust That The Other Party Will Not Abuse Its Power

One essential feature of partnerships is cooperation between the union and management in working towards a common goal. If one party is defending itself against a real or imagined abuse of its partners’ power, it may withhold information, become inflexible or fear experimentation, thereby thwarting cooperative problem-solving.

An example of trust in the partnership process is seen when the parties bargain to eliminate narrow job classifications. Traditional job classifications were enacted to guard against arbitrary use of power on the part of management. But narrow job classifications reduce the flexibility of the firm to properly allocate workers. To get away from restrictive job classifications or

job functions, there has to be trust that management will not use worker participation to “speed up and lay off” or to play personal power games.

In one manufacturing partnership, the employer set up an autonomous multi-skilled work team in one department. As the team became more efficient, management cut the hours of work for team members, leading to a loss of pay. This management decision undermined the Union’s trust and led the union to refuse to extend the autonomous work team programs to other departments.

In partnerships which involve semi-autonomous work teams, management must trust that employees will not take advantage of new, more flexible systems and slack off from work. With the decrease of middle management supervision, there is much more self-monitoring in the workplace, and management cannot oversee the work of individuals as closely as it did in traditional work systems.

Trust Is Built by Walking the Talk

Trust requires a level of comfort which is developed by repeated positive interactions. It is important for the words to be backed up by deeds and for the words to explicitly address the hard issues and not sweep them under the rug. The partners should make an attempt to explicitly address problem situations that were created within the old bargaining relationship prior to the partnership, and to jointly develop a plan for how the partnership will fix them in a fashion that is mutually satisfactory. Then, the partnership must be consistent in following the chosen plan and monitoring solutions to problems with an eye towards re-working any solutions that are not achieving the desired effect. Furthermore, in order to establish that the partnership is a new type of relationship it becomes extremely important in the early phases that each side lives up to the partnership expectations. Everyone in the workplace needs to see that people are walking the talk—not just talking the talk.

Trust Is Built by Full Communication

The trust between the people at the table may be different from the perceptions of trust by workers or managers who are not directly involved in partnership activities. To build trust at all levels of the partnership, the bargaining parties must disseminate all relevant information to all the stakeholders. In the former adversarial relationship, information may have been strategically withheld from certain parties, or unnecessary or burdensome information requests may have been made as a bargaining tactic. There should be regularized channels for sharing relevant information as it is generated, instead of producing it only on demand.

Communications between all levels of the partnership develop trust in the partnership process. Not only should there be more outward dissemination of information, but also partnership parties should be open to feedback from the less directly involved managers and workers. If everyone in the workplace understands the goals, motivations and agreements of the partnership, there will be greater accountability. In addition, everyone needs to understand what the agreements of the partnership really mean for each stakeholder. What are the obligations, costs and rewards? With this information each party can clarify what is happening in the partnership, match it with their expectations and work to understand any discrepancies between the two.

In one partnership, the union's understanding of the budget and the need for efficiency to combat the threat of privatization led the union to agree to a complete work reorganization effort, even though the union members were not completely sure what jobs they would be doing under the new system. Management became acutely aware during the partnership building process that the employees considered security a necessary element of the partnership. Therefore, as a condition for allowing greater flexibility in workforce allocation, the union was able to convince management (and the governing body) to enact a thirty month no layoff agreement with the understanding that during that time there could be workforce reductions only if the agency were privatized.▲

COMMUNICATION

Communication style, form and content establishes the partnership, holds it together, and provides one of the most tangible manifestations of a partnership process. By definition, to have a partnership means having an exchange of information and ideas on how the workplace should be run. To change communication styles is difficult, because of inertia in the way we do things. In addition, the new communications compete with old structures and personal styles that were developed in the previous work experience. Thus, it is not just the structures that need to change, but the style as well (although the structure can have a big influence on the style).

In order to address these questions we need to think about the goals of communication in the organization (more specifically the new partnership) and then to examine the structures and strategies implemented to achieve these goals.

Changing Behavioral Norms

Probably one of the most fundamental goals in improving communications in a partnership is to use these improvements as a medium to change the existing behavioral norms, attitudes and practices to create a new workplace that involves workers and treats them with greater respect and equality. "How you say it" becomes important because it embodies and supports specific norms and attitudes of the work (and societal) culture. Facilitators help organizations understand their current communication dynamic and how they might move to new communication in the partnership.

Prior to the initiation of the partnership, communications between the union and the agency had hit rock bottom. The negotiations were described as being "characterized by posturing on both sides; no direct discussion of issues; and traditional, win-lose adversarial negotiations. Professional agents on both sides did all the talking, often communicating in labor language that the other people at the table did not understand. In addition, there were behind-the-

scene conversations which increased tension, distrust, and turmoil.”

Changing the Information Flow

A key development is to change the system of communication from one that encourages a primarily top down flow of information to one that also includes bottom up and horizontal flows that improve the ability to collect and process important information. Communication becomes less about giving orders and becomes more of a two-way street. It is about providing better support for the work process rather than a way for management to exert control over workers.

Employees need information to do their job well and if there exist well-defined open channels of communication they are able to quickly let managers know what information is necessary to do their jobs, as well as provide specific information and feedback which can be valuable to the organization as a whole. In this way, the new communication system can increase the overall quantity, speed, and clarity of the information flow in an organization.

In one partnership they have created a computerized information system that creates a number of specific places to find particular kinds of information. There is a public information bulletin board with facts and figures about the organizations and its operations, since this is useful information that is not always at people's fingertips. In addition, there is a folder on the system which allows members of the organization to share any information pertaining to the organization and its activities. Anyone in the organization has access to this shared data system. All of this is in addition to using e-mail and electronic bulletin boards for information dissemination and feedback, which in some cases have eliminated the need for some meetings.

Feedback

Feedback strengthens the labor management relationship if employees' suggestions are given serious consideration and are responded to actively.

In one organization employee feedback alerted management to a problem employees were having with the consistency of information coming from the general manager. Sometimes when mid-management reported communications from upper management back to their respective workgroups everyone's version sounded like a completely different report. Management is coming to grips with realizing that important communications need to be more clearly spelled out from the top so that there are not multiple interpretations and embellishments spreading out through the organization.

A union president in one partnership had this to say about feedback: When the union and management came up with a mutually agreed upon communication plan the employees had strong response to the plan. Even though the union believed that there was trust between labor and management, as individuals the workers were not sure about the communication plan that they had developed. "So I guess it's good to get feedback. We're going to try to address these communication concerns as they come up because it's certainly essential to have buy-in at every step"

Increased Openness

Greater openness in communications facilitates multi-level involvement in decision making. When all stakeholders have all the information they need to make good decisions they can all seriously participate in organizational planning. In addition, the improved communication channels of partnerships can move worker knowledge from the shop floor to where it can be incorporated into organizational planning and workplace re-organization. Utilizing valuable tacit knowledge of line workers improves workplace efficiency through better organizational learning. In

addition, it increases the power of the employee, which reinforces support for involvement in the organization.

Communication Problems

It is important to not leave people out of the loop, because communication that flows freely encourages and builds trust. If people are left out of the loop accidentally, it is important to immediately deal with and fix the situation. However, there can sometimes be too much information communicated, perhaps too much to process at one time or too much extraneous information. It is important to not dump information on a party because people need time to process any information and make good decisions.

In one agency partnership, an assignment that was to be delegated from management to an employee did not get shared until the last moment, “Oh god! I need this done!”. What could have been an “empowering” assignment became dumping in this case. Management has made moves to share tasks and full information needed by the employees on time and to engage in better planning. In addition, they also sat down with people handling delegated duties and to see if these people felt that they had the skills or resources to do that work.

Communication Style

Some simple examples of improved communications skills are being an active listener and using constructive feedback. These styles of communication tend to create less defensiveness and therefore encourage information exchange among the different levels of the partnership. A fluid dialogue among the different stakeholders is valuable because it brings different interests and perspectives to the table.

Some examples of communication break down are parties not communicating their true interests or stakeholders being too nice in the interest of preserving the good will of the partnership and allowing controversies to be pushed under the rug, communication that does not contain all pertinent information (perhaps because of a lack of trust), parties left out of the loop, or parties

talking past each other if they are not speaking in the same “language”. Joint communication strategies to set clear, mutually agreed upon methods to deal with relationship difficulties are essential to conflict resolution.▲

CONCLUSIONS

In drafting our findings about partnerships, we are mindful of the literature which precedes our work, touting partnerships as a solution to a myriad of micro and macro economic problems. In this conclusion, we respond to the proponents of partnerships with some caveats and concerns.

The Dunlop Commission's Report and Recommendations

The Commission on the Future of Worker-Management Relations (also known as the Dunlop Commission) in 1995 published a Report and Recommendations. This report outlined the decline of the US economy, changes in the social environment, problems in employment, earnings and other job market outcomes. The Commission answered these findings with a program for increased employee involvement and labor-management cooperation. This Report and Recommendations is significant and bears summarizing here because it laid the foundation for a renewed burst of employer and union activity towards partnerships.

The Dunlop Commission charted some significant economic developments. Few would dispute the Commission's findings that there has been a long-term decline in the rate of growth of productivity, that in the US there is an increased globalization of economic life, that technology has changed work and will continue to do so, that we are shifting from goods-producing sectors to service producing sectors. The Commission looked at the workforce and found occupational structures shifting toward white collar jobs. It noted that the variety of different establishments and firms of different sizes had different workplace practices and outcomes depending in part on the number of employees. In a report section titled: "The Changing Workforce", the Commission found that the number of workers entering the workforce, the demographic and ethnic composition of the workforce and the educational levels of those entering the workforce have changed radically from the past decades. There is no surprise that the Commission found that the changes in

economic, technological and competitive conditions produced declining wages, high unemployment, an increased wage gap between skilled workers and less educated workers, and that the low wage workers are the fastest growing segment of the workforce.

The Commission looked at working conditions and found more hours worked on average by a US worker than in any other advanced country except Japan. Simultaneously however, the Commission noted that the economy, the labor market and the legal system are producing many “contingent “ jobs that are not full time or for a single employer. On the health and safety front, the Commission found that we are not making significant improvements over the statistics of the past decade.

In terms of bargaining relationships, the Commission noted that the prevalence of collective bargaining has declined and that correspondingly the number of strikes or lockouts also declined as compared to earlier post-World War II years.

Finally the Commission noted the increase of state and federal government regulation of the workplace.

The Commission concluded that labor and management relationships have failed to adjust to the changed economy and workplace environment. “A healthy society cannot long continue along the path the U.S. is moving with rising bifurcation of the labor market.”

In answer to this dire picture, the Commission recommended expanding employee participation in a variety of forms, provided it does not impede employee choice of whether or not to be represented by an independent labor organization. “Employee participation will have to expand to more workplaces if the American economy is to be competitive at high standards of living in the 21st century. Participation must also expand to include more workers and a broader array of issues if it is to meet the expectations and address the vital concerns of the nation’s work force” (Dunlop Commission p. 12).

Our Response to the Dunlop Commission

Now two and a half years after the Dunlop Commission’s report, the Task Force responds that, in our experience, a blanket prescription for “participation” will not answer the complaints

about the economy or the workplace environment. We find that only in the specific workings of each particular partnerships are some potential answers for the unique complaints of the particular agency or firm and the workers employed therein. (We have not examined the potential for employee involvement schemes in the absence of a union because, as we outlined in our introduction, we are gravely concerned about the potential imbalance between unrepresented employees and management in these schemes.) Looking at our country's macro-economic picture, partnerships present a process for the involvement of labor, business and government in finding solutions. However, the partnership itself does not solve the issues which the Dunlop Commission raised.

Partnerships Are a Process, Not a Solution

As described in the overview above, there are many types of partnerships. Each partnership has its own balance of participation and reserved stakeholder power and control.

In the decision-making partnerships, there may be opportunities for improved training for low wage workers and narrowing of the wage gap between management and workers. However, if there is an imbalance of power or a lack of commitment to training goals on the part of management, the partnership can be a mechanism for exploitation of the workforce.

In consultative partnerships, there may be opportunities for management to respond quickly to technological changes in an agency or industry with the assistance of worker expertise. But these consultative partnerships, if not balanced by a strong job security agreement, could exacerbate the very problem that the Dunlop commission noted. Moves towards new technology can marginalize unskilled workers, lead to layoffs and increase the wage gap.

Partnerships Do Not Replace Collective Bargaining

Most importantly we note that partnerships are not an alternative to collective bargaining. We believe that collective bargaining provides a necessary balance to the changing system of labor-management relations. In the collective bargaining agree-

ment, labor and management can set out the ground rules for partnering. The collective bargaining agreement can protect the critical separate interests of the parties and create an environment within which the parties can experiment and find flexibility.

Partnerships present an opportunity for organized labor to participate in the dialogue about how to restructure the US economy and make workplaces better for all workers. But to understand any particular partnership, all stakeholders must critically assess their power relationships, their independent goals, the trust and communication which exists in the bargaining relationship and which can potentially exist in the new partnership structures.

This set of lessons does not present absolute answers for how unions, management or politicians engaged in partnerships will make their relationships successful; it can only suggest some potential benefits to partnering and some concrete examples of what barriers stand in the way of successful partnerships. ▲

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