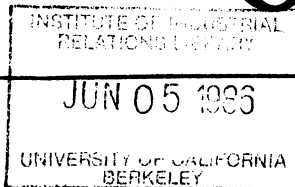


# LABOR CENTER REPORTER



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## "THE CHANGING SITUATION OF THE WORKERS AND THEIR UNIONS"

*by Bruce Poyer*

The report which is the title and subject of this article was drafted after several years of study and discussion by the AFL-CIO Committee on the Evolution of Work, chaired by Secretary Treasurer Tom Donahue. The report was issued by the AFL-CIO last February, and has been widely discussed by trade unionists and their representatives throughout the country.

In the words of the Committee, its recommendations are the result of "a searching self-examination of (labor's) strengths and weaknesses, encompassing a wide range of proposed actions to strengthen our unions and our movement and to enhance our ability to serve present and future members." The report is all of that and more, because it opens up the process of "examination and appraisal," and because the Committee urged that this process be continued within the AFL-CIO and within every affiliate" as the basis for planning realistically for the future." If they do less than that, unions cannot hope to grow again or to represent their members effectively, and some believe that even their future survival is now at stake.

**The View from Where We are Now--**The report begins by painting a bleak picture of organized labor's prospects. It finds that the U.S.--indeed every industrialized nation--is undergoing a scientific, technological, economic revolution every bit as significant as the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century--and it finds that unions are behind the pace of change. Long-term changes in the workforce (especially in manufacturing and construction vs. the service industries) and declines in the unionized sector are traced out, along with the increasing concentration of industries in unorganized geographical areas, and the emerging pattern of more part-time and casual and irregular employment, replacing long-term full employment. The report is ominous not only in its documented description of the failure of labor law, but also in its perception that the public simply does not understand that failure.

But the basic tone of the report is realistic and constructive, and not alarmist. It stresses the need for serious concern, but concentrates on identifying the seeds of resurgence that must now be cultivated. Its five basic recommendations to get on with this job are as follows:

(1) Experimenting with new methods of advancing worker interests, such as negotiating minimum guarantees and then undertaking more advocacy for individual interests; more recourse to arbitration or mediation rather than strikes in settling disputes; more attention to comparable worth and to health and safety issues; more stress on effective participation in decision-making processes;

(2) Establishing new categories of union membership for workers in non union workplaces, particularly for former union members who are employed in such workplaces, but possibly also (depending on further feasibility studies) by offering services such as group health coverage or job training opportunities to those not otherwise eligible;

(3) Expanding union use of electronic media to increase public awareness of the contributions of unions, in the workplace and in society at large;

(4) Making greater use of corporate campaigns, including more selective control over pension fund investments and more public disclosure of corporate anti-union tactics; such efforts are considered necessary to pressure employers into respecting workers' organizing rights, which are no longer effectively protected by law;

(5) Establishing experimental organizing committees separate from existing labor entities (whose first priorities must be to provide services to existing members).

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**Membership Participation, Communications, and Structural Changes--**The report contains many recommendations for increasing membership participation in unions, including improved community services, better interaction between members and leaders (Kirkland and Donahue have themselves provided an effective example in this regard); more use of "issues conferences" and membership opinion surveys; better orientation programs for new members; and better training of officers, stewards, and rank and file members. The report recognizes the need for more adequate funding of public education facilities to help meet these training goals.

The report suggests a number of ways in which organized labor can improve its communication with the public, in particular, through curriculum improvements in elementary and secondary schools (where there is little reference to labor or to unions, or even to the jobs and lives of working people), but also through better training of union spokespersons in media techniques.

The report contains many recommendations for improving organizing activities, including better training of organizers, greater use of modern communications technology, more careful selection of organizing targets, and more effort to bring the free-riders into active participation in the unit.

Finally, the report makes five basic recommendations for structural changes that would enhance labor's effectiveness, including (1) encouragement of appropriate mergers and adoption of new guidelines to facilitate them; (2) direct participation by AFL-CIO officers and staff in effecting appropriate mergers; (3) adoption of new machinery for resolving organizing disputes among unions; (4) adapting modern budgeting and program analysis and planning techniques to help solve union management and financing problems; and (5) development of more secure funding for state and local central bodies. With respect to the latter proposal, the average level of affiliation with state federations is only 55%; the report suggests a five-year plan to phase in a mandatory rather than an optional per capita payment to fund both state federations and central labor councils.

Throughout the report, there is an emphasis on the enormous diversity of the nation's organizing and collective bargaining situations. Thus the range of proposals is broad, in recognition that what may work in one situation may not work in another. In addition, many of the proposals are laced with precautions and warnings; for example, recognizing the common misuse of QWL plans by employers.

**Implementing the Proposals--**First, the above review touches only the highlights of the Committee report. LCR subscribers who have not read it should do so: send to our Labor Center for a free copy if you do not have the report, or cannot get it from your union. Understanding the constructive thrust of this report is the first necessary step in implementing any of its proposals.

Second, the four Coordinators of education and research programs in our Labor Center are members of AFT, and our union has taken the Committee report very seriously, from the top leadership level to the locals. As union members and as labor educators, we welcome the report as an important first step in the process of examination and appraisal. What it contains must be taken seriously by every thoughtful trade unionist. What it omits must be put on the agenda for further consideration. Labor educators throughout the nation have taken the same position, and will seek as we will to stimulate the process of examination and appraisal in our programs for trade unionists.

Third, the Committee report is short on positive suggestions for implementing some otherwise unassailable goals. For example, there is a recommendation for more arbitration and mediation to settle disputes, with less recourse to strikes. But where is the machinery to make this work? Where was it when President Reagan took the initiative and "settled" the PATCO strike his way? What are the structures and the procedures that the AFL-CIO itself might develop, which might permit settlements without recourse to similarly disastrous strikes?

The Committee report demands further consideration of such implementation questions that it leaves hanging. In this regard, LCR solicits the comments and responses of those readers who are also seriously concerned about "The Changing Situation..." We will summarize or print those which are useful, concise, and constructive, in the spirit of the report itself, including those which may be critical.

Our Labor Center is planning now for a two-day conference next spring, in San Francisco, on "The Changing Situation and the Future of the Unions." We would like to have any of your ideas, comments, or reactions that may help to make that conference a more useful follow-up to the initial "examination and appraisal" report of the AFL-CIO Committee on the Evolution of Work.

-- Bruce Poyer