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LABOR AND THE LABOR CENTER-- A LETTER FROM THE NEW LABOR CENTER CHAIR

by Marty Morgenstern

Over twenty years ago, the California Labor Federation and the University of California agreed on guidelines which called for the establishment of a University Labor Center. Those guidelines mandate the development of "University programs that will enable the labor movement to function more effectively as an essential and responsible institution in our free society." The assignment has proven difficult.

In 1954, 35% of America's non-agricultural workers were in unions; by last year that figure had fallen to 18%. Areas of greatest union strength, manufacturing and construction, are dwindling in relative size as service industries, only 10% unionized, are on the rise. Population increases continue in the poorly organized sun belt while the nation's more union conscious regions are treading water or becoming less populated. All this was reported by the AFL-CIO Committee on the Evolution of Work in 1985.

Yet membership losses cannot be explained solely by the reduction of employment levels in basic manufacturing industries, nor by population shifts. Unions that are, or were, among the most powerful in the nation have lately suffered serious reverses. Militant organizations in the lumber and copper industries, once considered impregnable, have lost strikes and decertification elections. Non-union construction firms are growing in size and number. Even the steel and auto worker's unions are having serious difficulties.

Recent decisions of the National Labor Relations Board have reversed longstanding case law and rolled back union and worker rights. Our Federal Government, with Presidential support, dismissed striking air traffic controllers and rid itself of their union, PATCO. Much of industry proved eager to follow this lead. For many workers--TWA's flight attendants and Hormel's meat packers are only the most current examples--their first and major bargaining priorities were to limit concessions and preserve jobs.

Labor's problems are further complicated by the fullness of its agenda. Difficult and volatile issues, like affirmative action and pay equity, that address fair and decent treatment for minorities and women must be attended to. Union energies are being constantly taxed in battles with those who seek to erode the major protections offered workers in our society: Social Security, Workers' Compensation, Unemployment Insurance, minimum wages and pension safeguards. Changes occurring in the attitudes and lifestyles of American families--two wage earners per family is the new norm--affect attitudes about work, pay, benefits and the union. Demands are being made for flexible work schedules, longer vacations, sabbaticals, and part-time and shared jobs. Considerable and growing concern is being expressed over issues of satisfaction, involvement, and control at the workplace. In all, labor's leaders are faced with serious and complex problems, increasing management intransigence and a hostile federal government. The fact that many younger workers view traditional union values and rhetoric as hopelessly out of date doesn't make their task any easier.

Yet, if these are not the best of times for the American labor movement, it has seen and survived much worse. In the years between 1920 and 1929, the AFL lost over 30% of its membership. A decade that began with nearly 20% of the workforce organized ended with barely 10% in unions, while the press regularly ran stories about "The Collapse of Organized Labor." The collapse never came. Instead the movement found new energy and revolutionary new ways to organize, and the 1930s marked the greatest and most glorious era in the history of American unions. In its current adversity, the AFL-CIO looks to those days and insists that resurgence and sustained growth are again within its grasp; the leadership has proclaimed its commitment to that goal. Is there a role for the University's Labor Center in

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this effort, or is it an academic extravagance, too removed from the real problems of the day to offer any practical assistance when times are tough? As Labor's crisis tests the Labor Center's mettle, what plans should we prepare?

The core curriculum of labor education has traditionally been the training given union stewards, rank and file leaders, organizers and business agents. The difficulties already discussed, and the need for labor to reach workers with little prior exposure to unions, will only increase the need for labor education. Once the only communication tools a union activist was required to operate were a mimeograph machine and a megaphone, but that time is long gone. Today unions need expertise in the use of computers, electronic communications, polling and much more. There are new concerns: drug testing, hidden but deadly work hazards, and the soaring cost of health insurance, to name but a few. These must be researched and analyzed, and the resulting information made widely known to union members. There is more to learn, and more to be taught, than ever before. Today's labor educators must master new material as well as more effective new methods for teaching adults.

There should be an increase in the level of university resources allotted to projects which deal with the needs of labor organizations and their members. As union strength was eroding in industry, public sector unionism was in a period of rapid growth. In recent years engineers, doctors, lawyers, scientists, clericals, and thousands of operational and administrative employees who work in government bureaucracies, chose to be represented by unions. These are the very sort of people who have resisted organization in the private sector. Civil service protections and the reluctance of most public employers to exhibit overt anti-union animus likely lessen the risks of union membership in public employment. Does this mean that only fear of reprisal and employer hostility inhibits similar union growth among private sector professional and clerical employees? Or have the organizations successfully enlisting public workers discovered new and better approaches to white collar organizing? The answer to this question could be of great importance to labor, it merits serious examination by trained university researchers. An important Labor Center function is to encourage and facilitate the involvement of university resources--faculty, students, research facilities and money--in developing the educational tools the trade union movement needs.

The workings and history of unions are largely ignored by the public media and neglected in our schools. Today's students are taught nothing of the indecent and often deadly conditions of employment that prevailed in the good old days of a totally "union-free" environment. Our schools don't deal with the fact that when managers had total freedom over working conditions they favored starvation wages, exploited child labor, and frequently visited every sort of indecency and humiliation on their employees. What unions do, how they are organized, the laws requiring majority support and internal democracy, these topics are also avoided in American schools. Young people have a right to know about the struggles and sacrifices that accompanied the organization of American workers and the changing circumstances that came about as the union movement grew. Knowing will help them to make informed decisions, especially when faced with a choice between joining a union or accepting work in a non-union shop. Another important role of the Labor Center is to use its prestige, influence and energies to get more and better information about labor into our school curricula and public agenda.

This report suggests some things a labor education center might do to enhance its value to labor and the community. It is not meant to be exhaustive, there are many other projects we are, should be, and will be pursuing in the effort to fulfill our mandate. With American workers and their organizations in an all-out struggle to maintain their status and regain their strength, that task will be more difficult than ever before, and more critical.

-- Marty Morgenstern

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