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The Labor Movement's Great 21st Century Comeback

American Unions and the labor movement have a chance to take back America. We need to engage the membership and the public to help shape the future of the labor movement. We cannot revitalize and expand our labor movement without building an independent politics of labor. Unifying and mobilizing membership will allow labor to reinvent itself in the 21st century.

How can Americans bring organized labor back to the middle class where a single income is able to take care of a family? In 2005, U.S. labor unions made headlines for a pair of events that highlighted the labor movement's struggle to stem decades of decline and lost influence. In July of that year, four of the nation's largest unions split away from the AFL-CIO, a voluntary federation of nearly five dozen national and international unions. The following September, a new group, the Change to Win Federation, was founded by seven unions and 6 million workers who were devoted to building a movement of working people. Observers were left to wonder what was going on and what these events said about the "state of the unions" in the United States.¹

The first step toward the revitalization of American unions should be to create a form of membership accessible to any worker. The biggest cause of adversity relating to accessibility is that the majority of both male and female hourly workers simply do not vote at all. This is not just a matter of indifference and division. With suburban sprawl and two-hour-a-day commutes, many Union Members have a workday that really does not give them a fair or equal shot at getting to the polls. In a few states, such voters can get an absentee ballot, but that takes foresight and planning that we seem to lack. Reaching out to members this way would bolster our solidarity. Allowing on-line voting is another possible solution.

Jerry Tucker - a Leader/activist for the New Directions Movement within the UAW was quoted in a speech from February of 2005 "The revitalization of the labor movement will happen only as it becomes part of a larger social movement driven by a militant response to injustice well beyond our current ranks and workplaces. It will come as part of a culturally transforming period. Good practices will survive and new collective strategies and tactics will drive the

movement forward. 21st century workers need a labor movement committed to fight along side them. Yes, today many American workers are cynical and, jointly, do have reduced expectations. This was also true in the early 1930's. There are among them good and even great leaders for the struggle to come...A program that reconnects with workers built around their needs at the base, not just the notions of distant bureaucrats, is the way to start rebuilding the labor movement." ³

To bring labor back, some change of law has to occur. Even under a Democratic President, House, and Senate it was still easy for anti labor senators to stop a striker-replacement ban in 1993. To bring a real labor movement back, we may need a more nonconforming, even open-minded approach, and one that finally brings the "rights revolution" to American workers, regardless of gender or race. The ultimate goal is still to change our labor laws and bring back the old union spirit embodied in words like "solidarity" and the use of "brother" and "sister" as affectionate forms of address.

Writing in the "Observer," the publication of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, John Evans pointed out "Unions are institutions which counterbalance the centrifugal forces created by globalization and technological change. They can play a crucial role both in redressing imbalances of power in the process of change and in ensuring that productivity increases are used to raise living standards in an equitable way." ⁴ Put another way, much of management has not yet learned by increasing the wages of employees it not only increases corporate productivity but boost employee purchasing power. As workers spend their paychecks, they drive demand upwards.

Looking into the distance, we can perhaps see that new wave of union evolution strengthening. Its predominant face is of color, and female. It is Spanish/English bilingual and capable in many languages. We need to restore poetry to our politics, the meaning that strengthens the muscle. There has been progress, of course. The labor movement's vibrant campaigns are all about immigrants, people of color, and women claiming their rights to representation and fair wages. We will accomplish these goals only by making organizing a top concern throughout the American labor movement and building a stronger, more determined army of worker activists. ⁵

The labor movement, however, must find the right marketing strategies and approaches to allay the fears of immigrants to engage in protected union activities, and to convince those workers the unions can make positive

improvements in their working lives.⁶ It is depressing that there are so few women or people of color in the foreground on either side of the current labor battle. If we can bring back organized labor, we can bring back middle-class America -- the backbone of this nation -- where a single income is able to take care of a family.

Finally, in the end, it will be a change in the political sea that will spark a labor movement revitalization.

¹ Barry Ray - www.fsu.com/pages/2007/01/16/OrganizedLabor.html

² Mark Dudzik - www.thelaborparty.org/a_debate.html

³ Jerry Tucker - www.gmgypsy.com/2-5-05CrisisInUnionism2.php

⁴ John Evans - www.oecdobserver.org/

⁵ Gerald McEntee - www.inthesetimes.com/article/680/organizing_the_future_of_the_american_labor_movement/

⁶ John Jay Matchulat - www.bakerdonelson.com/Marketing/Matchulat-OrganizedLabor.pdf