

Challenges for Union Renewal in the U.S.
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As harsh as is the current reality of the U.S. labor movement, and as much as those of us that are part of the American labor movement are struggling both to mourn and to organize at the same time, the fact is that we are down but we are definitely not out. One of the things that I have found over and over again in my research on unions in the U.S. is that if the American labor movement were doing everything right and still losing, then it would be hopeless. However, that is not the case, far from it! The question is not whether there is a potential for union renewal in the US because those potentials and opportunities remain great. The question is whether American unions and their leaders are willing to take the risks and do the hard work that it takes to realize that potential.

There are many contextual factors that are well beyond labor's control but there are also other factors that are well within its control. These include unions' organizing strategy, their bargaining strategy and the vision that they put forth to their members and to unorganized workers. It is those strategies and visions that provide US unions with the potential to recapture their power at the bargaining table, at the ballot box and in organizing. In so doing, it is not just a question of rebuilding the American labor movement within one national context. As Elaine Bernard explained in the previous plenary address, the U.S. labor movement is in many ways the last hedge against complete corporate power in the world. If we disappear, they are just going to run over our borders to everywhere else. I do not have time here to go through a detailed analysis of everything U.S. unions are trying to do. Instead, I will talk about what I think are the key elements of labor's renewal: choosing organizing targets in areas of existing concentrations of power; the integration of organizing, bargaining and political strategies; running better organizing campaigns; projecting a vision of what unions are about, particularly across borders; and improving union political strategies. If you in Canada want to get up to that 50 percent union density rate, then you are also probably going to have to think about what it's going to take to change your strategies in each of these areas.

Organizing and Power: Choosing Targets

Our labor movement is currently very divided. At the center of this raging debate are two constructs: one is density and the other is jurisdiction. Without

question, union renewal depends on using union density where unions have it and increasing union density where they do not. That means that organizing success depends on choosing targets where unions have the leverage to get the employer to back off an anti-union campaign, to get an employer to recognize a union and to get a first contract. Where unions are already strongly present, they can do use their density and bargaining power either directly to get the employer to back off or indirectly through leverage with unionized suppliers, customers, investors or allies in the community and in government. When unions move outside their primary jurisdiction in search of easier election wins, it does nothing to stop the erosion of density in their own jurisdictions or to strengthen their bargaining power with already organized units. What it does do, however, is expend precious resources in jurisdictions where they may be able to win small elections but do not have the density, the bargaining power and the experience to represent these new members and gain good contracts for them.

Yet we can not forget that union power is about more than density, jurisdiction and union structure. We have plenty of U.S. unions that stick to one jurisdiction, and even have density in that jurisdiction but have no power because they never capitalize on that density when it comes either to bargaining or organizing or more likely because they have also failed to remember where their power comes from. All the density and leverage mean nothing in the world if workers do not feel enough ownership of the union not to cross that picket line or to sign those membership cards or to be active in their union. Unions have to do the hard work of developing leaders, of building solidarity and commitment, of developing community and labor alliances and of making real differences in workers lives at work and at home. Building power also requires giving new members, particularly women and workers of color, a seat at the table, and a voice in the union once organizing is won. It is worth noting in the US, the majority of new workers being organized are women and people of color.

In discussing density and power, we also forget that some jurisdictions are a lot harder to organize than others. It is one thing to organize in health care, or hotels, or laundries or warehouse distribution where no matter what they still have not figured out how to move the nursing home to Mexico or the hotel to China. It is quite different to be organizing in manufacturing or information technology or call centers where 70 percent of employers, when faced with workers try to organize in the US, threaten to close. We have literally had a hemorrhaging of union jobs. So much so, that 39 percent of all jobs leaving the US are union, even though overall union density is only 12 percent. The only way the labor movement in the U.S. is going to be rebuilt is if those unions that have been successfully organizing in the service sector, such as AFSCME,¹ UNITE HERE² and the SEIU,³ are making the same commitment to make sure that

¹ American Federation of State, Country and Municipal Employees

² Union of Needletrades, Textiles and Industrial Employees [+HERE (Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union)]

³ Service Employees International Union

manufacturing gets organized, high-tech gets organized and clerical workers get organized. For example, there is no union in the U.S. right now that sees its priority or its core jurisdiction to organize private sector clerical workers.

Integrating Organizing, Bargaining and Political Action

Developing and planning strategies that tap unions potential strength will also require greater integration of unions' core activities, something the American labor movement does not currently do very well. This will involve integrating organizing, bargaining and political action. In particular, it entails having to expand the use of bargaining leverage to demand that the employer recognize the union in non-union workplaces. Imagine if we had done that back when we had 37 percent density or even when we had 22 percent density. It is a lot harder to do that in the private sector when you have only 8 percent union density, but it still can be done. It also means coordinating activities through production chains to leverage the employer to back off their anti-union activity. It requires taking on entire firms and industries in intensive multi-site, multi-union and often multi-country campaigns. Some examples of this can be seen in current campaigns being waged by UNITE HERE and the Teamsters at Cintas, the SEIU and other service sector unions at Sodexo-Marriott and Compass, and the CWA in the wireless industry. Those kinds of campaigns are what are required to organize in a multinational environment.

But in the rush to organize we cannot forget that our ability to organize depends directly on how effective we have been at representing members. If we are not making significant gains at the bargaining table for our existing members and we are not getting good contracts, and we are not building power between contracts, then what do we have to offer unorganized workers who will have to jump through those hoops of fire in order to be organized? Part of organizing and bargaining also requires the research do understand corporate power and understand how to interfere with their profit centers, their growth plans, their key relationships, their key decision makers. If we do not do that research and we do not understand who ultimately has the power in the companies we are trying to organize we cannot win. Sadly, when I interviewed union organizers I found that the majority of them did not even know who ultimately owned the company they where trying to organize. I found less than 1 percent of unions had made any contact globally with unions other countries when they were organizing multinational firms. Unions must understand they cannot operate in isolation form the broader global labor movement and labor related social justice movements. They cannot see this as "we are organizing for America to protect American jobs." Nor can the "Global North," whether it is Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom or another labor movement, say that they are organizing to protect union jobs in the "Global North." Yet the majority of unions in Europe and North America tend to focus their organizing and bargaining efforts locally even when the nexus of the control of the company is across the border or on the other side of the world. The only way to take on multinational corporations is to

run global campaigns. It cannot be one sided, it cannot be U.S. unions constantly saying to other countries “Help us! Help us!” If American unions want other unions to rescue them then they have to go out there and be willing to do the hard work of helping workers in Thailand, in China and in Latin-America to organize. As we heard earlier tonight and in the recent death of a Teamster organizer in El Salvador, it sometimes means we may even be risking our lives just like they are risking theirs. It is not an easy task to organize globally.

Better Organizing Campaigns

We also have to make fundamental changes in how we go about organizing. I cannot develop this in detail here⁴, but the fact is that the majority of American unions are running really poor campaigns. They are not putting enough resources into organizing. They are not developing rank and file committees. They are not training member volunteers. They are not using escalating pressure tactics in the work place and with allies in their communities so that the cost of not settling with the union is greater than the cost of settling with the union. They are not setting goals and benchmarks and using assessments to keep evaluating where they are and what they need to change in order to win. They are not choosing the kinds of issues that inspire workers to jump through those hoops of fire that it takes to organize. None of this is easy. At the same time the American labor movement has been fumbling and struggling to figure out how to organize more just to stand still.

Projecting a Vision

Global Capital has become more and more sophisticated in breaking unions where they exist and keeping them out where they do not. For unions, these changes require major shifts in resource allocations, institutional structure and organizing strategies. Even the most successful unions cannot rest on their laurels. They may be organizing but they are still barely making a dent in their industries. We can not wait for labor law reform, nor can we rely on pollsters to tell us just what the magic words are that will make unions more palatable. That's where we currently are: we now have this approach that says we are not supposed to say “union” but rather “voice at work” because polling showed that workers were more comfortable with the term “voice at work.” If we cannot say the word “union” and we cannot say the word “power,” we are not going to be able to build a labor movement.

We now need to look at where workers are and we need to move them to a different place. How do we do that? We do that best if we get out in front on the

⁴ Editors' note. For a detailed assessment of organizing campaigns, see Bronfenbrenner, K., & Hickey, R. (2004). Changing to organize: A national assessment of union strategies. In Milkman, R., & Voss, K. (Eds.), *Rebuilding labor: Organizing and organizers in the new union movement* (pp. 17-61). Ithaca, NY: ILR Press.

issues that are threatening American workers the most. That means we have to stand out in front and say U.S. foreign policy is wrong, everyone has to stand out in front and say the war in Iraq is wrong. The labor movement has to stand out in front and say our failure to have national health care, to protect pensions, to protect against the 12 hour day and mandatory overtime are all wrong. We need to stand up for immigrant workers but we also cannot forget African American workers. We need to stand out in front on the issue of public education and we need to stand out in front on issues of abortion rights and gay and lesbian rights.

In other words, we have to think about vision, about what it takes workers to jump through those hoops of fire. We have to think about labor education. American unions are shifting money away from education into organizing but if you cut labor education you are destroying the seed corn because education is what develops leaders. Education is what teaches members about the issues, it's what teaches members why they should not vote for George W. Bush. It helps workers to understand that workers in Mexico or China or Canada are not their enemy. It gets workers to wrestle with the issues of racism. It gets workers to understand class. By cutting education within unions, it's shifting resources into organizing, but we then have a new problem because we have no one to develop the organizing committee and to train the member volunteers. In fact, I would say that putting resources into education is even more essential to labor revitalization than restructuring unions.

Political Strategy

Finally, we also have to think about our political strategy. We cannot keep throwing money at candidates that do not support our political strategy. We have to think about what our friend Tony Mazzocchi said which is that labor should have a platform and have candidates endorse the platform. Unions do best when they are out there campaigning on issues not on candidates. We need to encourage debate. We need to encourage experimentation but not be so arrogant as to believe that any one of us, any one union, any one individual has a magic formula and that those who do not agree with us have sold out. Most of all right now, the American labor movement cannot give up for if they do the race to the bottom around the world will move even faster. U.S. corporations are hell-bent on making a world safer and richer for multinationals like Wal-Mart and Halliburton and not for workers and not for unions.