

# The Future of Organized Labor in the U.S.

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by Bill Fletcher Jr. , Kate Bronfenbrenner and Donna Dewitt (Feb 21, 2005) Topics: Labor

The essence of trade unionism is social uplift. The labor movement has been the haven for the dispossessed, the despised the neglected, the downtrodden, the poor.—A. Philip Randolph

An important debate has commenced within the ranks of organized labor regarding the future of the movement. From our experience we know that the top-to-bottom' approach to revitalizing workers' organizations will not foster meaningful membership participation and support. The debate must be joined by rank-and-file union members and leaders, other labor activists, scholars and the broad array of supporters of trade unionism. It must be open, frank and constructive, recognizing that we all have a stake in the outcome of these discussions.

The following represents the collective opinion of several individuals from different sections of the labor movement who have joined together to let our voices be heard as the debate unfolds. Our intervention in this debate is at least partly motivated by our sense that the concerns and perspectives of people of color and women are all but absent in these discussions about labor's future. The irony, of course, is that our respective demographic groups represent the future of organized labor in the USA, if organized labor is to have a future at all.

We look forward to your feedback.

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The economic and political changes over the last thirty years both in the USA as well as globally, have resulted in a far more hostile environment for labor unions specifically and for working people generally. In this context, contrary to the spirit of A. Philip Randolph's notion that the essence of trade unionism is social uplift, the trade union movement is rarely looked to today as a voice of progress and innovation, or a consistent ally of progressive social movements.

It is not just that organized labor declined as a percentage of the workforce since 1955; or that it carried out unfocused growth, evolving eventually into no growth; or that it emphasized servicing its current members rather than planting the seeds for future growth. It is that organized labor looks at itself as separate and apart from the rest of the working class, and, for that matter, does not see itself as the champion of workers and their communities, but rather a mechanism for advancing the interests of those it currently represents.

For organized labor in the USA, the path away from oblivion must begin with the recognition of the vastly different situation that the working class faces in the early 21st century from what existed even twenty years ago. Time and space do not permit an exhaustive examination of all of these changes. Much has been written about it in various journals and books. Suffice to say that the growth of *neo-liberal globalization*<sup>1</sup> has represented a dramatic change in the approach of capitalism toward both the working class as well as towards society as a whole. Multi-national corporations and their allies have concluded that the terms of any social partnership' must be altered in their fundamentals at the expense of working people. This view—neo-liberalism—has grown in importance, coming to dominate the thinking of both major US political parties and has guided the shift to the political Right in the ruling circles of the USA.

The current situation necessitates a new approach to strategy, tactics, and fundamentally, the vision of trade unionism. This is more than the production of new mission statements, but instead rests on the necessity to rethink the relationship of the union to its members, to the employer(s), to government, to US society as a whole, and to the larger *global village*. Can the union, we must ask, as an institution and as a representative of a larger movement, rise to the challenge of being a means to confront injustice, or is the union condemned to be solely an institutional mechanism to lessen the pain of contemporary capitalism on those fortunate to be members of

organized labor?

In this context, we propose the following:

1. There is a need for a vision that includes, but is not limited to organizing the unorganized: Missing from the current debate is a clear statement as to what the trade union movement actually believes. Of course there must be massive organizing of the unorganized. But a sole focus demonstrates the same inflexibly that reformers are attempting to root out. In spite of the qualified success of the organize-above-all-else approach, it is still being touted as the panacea to what ails the trade union movement. As essential as is organizing, alone it is not enough.

When the Congress of Industrial Organizations began to come into existence (with the formation, first, of the AFL's Committee on Industrial Organization) in 1935, there was a very different social, economic, and political climate. Yet this situation is frequently cited, ahistorically it should be noted, as a parallel to the moment in which we find ourselves.

While there are critical matters relative to the structure of unions, the AFL-CIO and organized labor as a whole that must be settled, these are not the issues which should be the starting point for any debate.<sup>2</sup> Why, we must ask, should millions of unorganized workers potentially sacrifice so much in order to join or form unions? Why should millions of potential allies of organized labor spend any amount of time away from their own core issues, to unite with the demands of organized labor? What does a reconstructed, if not reborn, trade union movement have to say to people of color and women that goes beyond the tried and true rhetoric of the past? What are unions doing about the increasing degradation of work, i.e., that even unionized workers are working harder, faster and longer than in the past, providing us less free time and increasing the level of stress on individuals, families and friendship circles? If these questions are not answered organized labor will not serve as a beacon of attraction to the millions of non-union workers in the USA, and, in fact, the rebirth of organized labor will be still-born.

2. The union movement must be unapologetically pro-public sector and pro-public service: Over the years, since the emergence of neo-liberalism, with the corresponding rejection of positive government intervention in the economy as the dominant philosophy directing globalization, the US trade union movement has addressed the symptoms rather than the disease. Thus, it has spoken out against privatization, cuts in social services, and right-wing tax proposals that reduce taxes on the wealthy and deceive the rest of us. This is all important, but organized labor has not tied this all together into a package. A clear example of this was the failure of much of organized labor to dissect the *actual* politics and economics of the Clinton administration, as it advanced institutions like the World Trade Organization, and supported notions of free trade, all of which undermined (and continues to undermine) the notion of the public sphere.

Organized labor in the USA must study the current economic and political situation, and understand that there is no space for a compromise with any view that rejects positive government intervention in the economy. Organized labor must also refuse to support individuals and/or organizations who believe that progress and social justice can be achieved by subordinating workers interests to those of unregulated businesses and financiers.

3. The union movement must stand for the expansion of democracy: Organized labor must stand AND fight for an expansion of democracy beyond the limits of formal legality. It must be the champion of the fight against racism, sexism, hetero-sexism, xenophobia, religious bias, and other forms of intolerance.

In the current national and international situation, democracy is under attack. Intolerance and irrationalism seem to be gaining the upper hand in the relations among people. Minorities are being excluded if not exterminated as a growing competition for diminishing resources takes place at precisely the same moment that immense amounts of wealth are being accumulated by the few.

Civil liberties are under assault. In the name of opposing terrorism, governments, including our own, are passing legislation that restricts the right to organize and protest. Those challenging the status quo are often viewed with a

jaundiced eye, with the assumption being that they are insufficiently loyal and patriotic. Discussions are being shut down in the name of fighting the common enemy, depending on who that enemy happens to be at any one point.

Elections are becoming a sham. In the USA the Electoral College effectively disenfranchises millions of voters, particularly in the South, and while the US demands the practice of one-person/one-vote internationally, at the federal level we have nothing approximating this. Compounding this problem is the evolution of gerrymandering into the equivalent of a science and the creation of so-called safe electoral districts, where opposition can be counted out. The *piece de resistance* is election fraud, always part of the US political environment, but now upgraded with the use of a combination of computer technology and voter intimidation, particularly directed at communities of color. Furthermore, millions of felons who are primarily people of color are disenfranchised.

The union movement must engage in struggles against these various undemocratic practices and move us away from a fortress-like society.

The future of the right to join or form trade unions is integrally linked to the future of democracy in the USA. In its own obvious interests, the union movement must unite the demand for the right to form or join unions—the right to organize—with the overall battle for democracy.

To be credible champions of democracy the union movement must fight for democracy within its own ranks. If our members believe that they have no control over the future of their own organizations, or are inadequately represented in them then we have failed. We will have created paternalistic organizations rather than organizations of the workers themselves.

4. We must have a U.S. union movement structure suited to advancing organizing of the unorganized workers: The question of the shape and structure of the US union movement cannot be driven by a concern about jobs for the officers and staffs of the current unions. It must be driven by the need to organize into unions the millions of unorganized workers who wish to join or form unions. It must provide legitimate representational structures for people of color and women, and ensure that these structures make-up a significant segment of the leadership of the trade union movement that reflects the diversity and aspirations of its membership. This means not only the inclusion of AFL-CIO constituency groups, but also an organized and active process of recruiting new delegates and leaders representative of the workforce in their respective industries, and the creation of opportunities for younger trade unionists to learn and test their own leadership abilities.

The structure of organized labor must orient unions toward their core jurisdictions— i.e., toward their regional, occupational or industrial base. The logic of this is to be found in the matter of expertise and efficiency. Those unions that have displayed a commitment to a particular industry, occupation and/or region will tend to be more studied in those arenas and better situated to strengthen the industrial power of the members.

Unions should only enter into new industrial sectors, occupations or regions if and when they are prepared to make the LONG-TERM commitment to that sector and have demonstrated a willingness to work with other unions in that same sector or region.

5. The union movement must reshape its political program to focus on the needs of the working class: The union movement has made the repeated mistake of assuming that it can tell its members how to vote, and that the Democratic Party structure will automatically represent their interest. What we promote as political education is rarely more than campaign publicity. The promise of the 1995 reform movement was for a different political program. We need to develop popular economic and political education programs that speak to where our members are socially and politically. Such a program should aim to create a framework through which they may begin to understand the political, economic and social issues of our times.

We must organize our members—politically— into popular organizations which are community-centered, concerned with politics, sensitive to different social groupings, and able to branch out into the community where

they, their families and friends can find a means to participate in a relevant political practice. This means the creation of electoral political organizations at the grassroots level that can engage in the arduous but necessary fight for power for working people. PACs and 527s cannot replace popular, mass-based organizations.

6. The union movement must organize in the South and Southwest: The November 2004 elections demonstrate two interesting things. First, there is a direct (though not exclusive) relationship between union membership and one's tending to vote in one's own economic interests. Two, the Black and Latino vote in the South and the Southwest while critical at the local, regional and state level, has not had the same effect in Presidential races due to the undemocratic nature of the Electoral College.

The union movement has put off organizing the South and the Southwest for too long. Successes in organizing the South and the Southwest will serve as a bridgehead for progressive politics in those regions, and allow the union movement to utilize these bases in order to advance a progressive agenda and build broader political support. Thus, resources need to be put into organizing that assumes that organizing is a long-term, strategic process rather than an event or action.

Any organizing in these regions must appreciate that an inability to embrace the African American and Chicano social movements respectively will result in disappointment, if not failure. Simply focusing union attention on the South and the Southwest, while an advance over what most unions are doing today, is insufficient. The unionizing of these regions must be connected to the fight for political power for traditionally disenfranchised groups. During the 1988 Presidential campaign, the Rev. Jesse Jackson put it best: *In one hand, you have a union card; in the other hand, you have a voting card.*

7. State federations and central labor councils must be democratic, inclusive, young and audacious: Too many central labor councils and state federations, due to their lack of representation, are disconnected from the realities that their members face, not to mention, the realities faced by the bulk of the working class. Central labor councils and state federations must represent strategic centers for local political action, coalition-building, member education and inter-union support. If any of this is to work, then central labor councils and state federations must look more like their memberships. Just as with the national AFL-CIO, the local and state bodies must provide legitimate representational structures for people of color and women. The local and state bodies must ensure that these structures make-up a significant segment of the leadership of the trade union movement thereby reflecting the diversity and aspirations of its membership. This means not only the inclusion of AFL-CIO constituency groups, but an organized and active process of recruiting new delegates and leaders representative of the workforce in their respective industries, and the creation of opportunities for younger trade unionists to learn and test their own leadership abilities.

8. The union movement needs real membership education: It is presumptuous to think that either organized and unorganized workers will blindly follow or adhere to a certain point-of-view without providing them with a coherent and up-to-scale mechanism by which they can access information. Without, however, the necessary resources for a significant, member-focused educational effort, it will be impossible to provide union members a different vision of trade unionism, achieve their loyalty, or motivate them.

Education not only means imparting information, but dialogue and debate as well. A reinvigorated labor movement needs an integrated education program that joins together an examination of domestic and international economics, as well as a critical look at US foreign policy. In addition, such education program must foster the development of a framework for advancing discussions about class, race, gender, capitalism and the fight for power for working people. As such, the notion that organizing can take place in the absence of education or that education is somehow a distraction or a draw away from organizing is absurd. Paying attention to the education of our base is a profound sign of respect. Calls for mobilization in the absence of a coherent and unified framework are disempowering, irrespective of the intentions, and will not invoke worker militancy or support.

9. The US union movement must build both global union partnerships and solidarity with others fighting global

injustice: The US trade union movement has made great advances away from the Cold War trade unionism of the past. In spite of these advances, the US trade union movement continues to be eyed with some level of suspicion by our friends beyond our borders, in part because of a frequent perception that we are engaged in protectionism. Excellent steps at union-to-union cooperation have, however, been taking place, but these must go much further. A platform for the transformation of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and the global union federations/international trade union secretariats must be advanced, and should genuinely strengthen the role of unions from the global South (Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America). The US union movement must adopt an approach that encourages union-to-union relationships and worker-to-worker exchanges, up to and including the reform and/or creation of new international labor bodies that support real solidarity. In addition, the US union movement must develop means and mechanisms for providing concrete support to union movements and other progressive movements involved in the struggle for global justice. Such a stand must represent resistance to the *race to the bottom* being conducted by global capitalism against workers in all countries. We can not engage in or be perceived to be engaging in selective international solidarity, i.e., solidarity only when it is in defense of US workers and our issues. Genuine international solidarity will also necessarily involve a willingness, on the part of the US trade union movement, to challenge US foreign policy when it undermines national self-determination and human rights.

We, who sign this document, do so with an interest in advancing discussion and debate within the union movement.

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## Notes

1. ↪ Neo-liberal globalization refers to an approach toward the economy, and specifically the reorganization of global capitalism that privileges individual gain, privatization, and the elimination of the public sphere as the social values of society. Globalization refers to the reorganization of global capitalism and does not refer to the notion of a global economy. Capitalism has always been a global system.
2. ↪ The Australian labor movement, in response to its own crises, began a process of union mergers and

consolidations with the hope that this would advance or aid growth. Several studies have indicated that it has not played a role in stopping the decline of their labor movement.