

CHALLENGES FACING THE U.S. LABOR MOVEMENT

Three major developments in the United States have impacted labor relations in recent decades: deindustrialization, neoliberalism, and declining union density.

First, the United States has witnessed a huge transformation from an industrial economy to a service or information-based economy. There have been massive plant shutdowns, capital flight, and a drastic decline in manufacturing jobs. Among those sectors impacted most severely are the auto, steel, and other heavy manufacturing industries that have traditionally been mainstays of the U.S. labor movement.

Secondly, the U.S. government has promoted neoliberalism both nationally and internationally by embracing the free market at all costs, advocating free trade, establishing regressive tax policies, allowing for a decline in social programs like welfare, privatizing government jobs, and promoting corporate domination while undermining worker rights.

President George Bush is a champion of neoliberalism. According to AFL-CIO President John Sweeney, Bush is “the very worst president in our lifetime, bar none.” Bush is the first “selected” president in U.S. history. Former Vice-President Al Gore won the popular vote in the 2000 presidential elections and would have been elected to the presidency if all the votes had been counted in the scandalous Florida election. But the Republican-dominated Supreme Court intervened, demanded that the counting of the ballots in Florida be stopped, and in effect appointed George Bush president.

In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, attacks, Bush and his right-wing allies in the United States have further consolidated their power. The U.S. war in Iraq and the attacks on civil liberties at home have all been conducted in the name of “homeland security.” Although the U.S. labor movement opposed the war in Iraq, their protests fell on deaf ears as the Bush administration lied to the American people and aggressively moved forward with the unilateral, pre-emptive war against Iraq.

Thirdly, there has been a steady decline in union density over the last fifty years. Fifty years ago, 35 percent of the U.S. workforce was unionized. Today, only 13 percent of the U.S. workforce is unionized, and less than 10 percent of the private sector workforce is unionized.

The decline in unionization has resulted in growing wage and income inequality. Of all of the industrialized nations in the world, the United States has the largest wage and income gap between the rich and the poor. In 1976, the richest 10 percent of the U.S. population owned one-half of the wealth. By 1995, the richest 10 percent owned 70 percent of all the wealth. Today, the bottom 80 percent of the U.S. workforce, four out of five working people, receives real hourly wages that are less than they were in 1989.

The decline in unionization means the continued expansion of the part-time, temporary, and contingent workforce, less job security, more economic insecurity, and a growing underclass of working poor. The vast majority of people living in poverty in the United States are not the unemployed, but the working poor. More than forty million Americans have no access to health care.

Studies show that in industries with a high level of unionization, the wages, benefits, and working conditions of all workers in the same industry improve, whether or not they are unionized. Nonunion employers will frequently match union wages and benefits to maintain a competitive workforce. Conversely, in industries with low levels of unionization, there is much less regulation, and workers have few protections at the workplace. In farm labor, the garment industry, domestic work, and low-wage service jobs, extreme exploitation and poverty wages are a daily reality to workers throughout America.

The basic rights of U.S. workers to unionize and to engage in collective bargaining are under attack. Weak labor laws have undermined workplace democracy. Anti-union consulting has become a major industry in America. Under the law, employers may openly interrogate workers about their union sympathies, intimidate workers by espousing the negative

consequences of unionization, and set up captive audience meetings to attack unions. Even if a union wins a certification election, there is no guarantee of ever obtaining a contract. From 1950 to 2000, the number of unfair labor practice complaints in union election campaigns grew by 400 percent. During the same period of time, complaints regarding employer refusal to bargain increased by 800 percent. Even when there is a blatant violation of labor laws, including the termination of pro-union employees, the penalty is so mild that it does not serve as a deterrent to employers intent on defeating a unionization campaign.

The right to strike has also been seriously undermined. Under current U.S. laws, workers cannot be fired for participating in a strike, yet it is perfectly legal for them to be “permanently replaced.” This legal loophole serves as a powerful threat against workers who may permanently lose their jobs if they dare go on strike.

One of the clearest reflections of the inadequacies of current U.S. labor law is the huge disparity between unionization rates in the public versus the private sector. In the public sector where there is much less employer resistance to unions, unionization is currently about 38 percent versus only 9 percent in the private sector.

The Changing U.S. Work Force

Another important characteristic of the U.S. labor force is its demographic change. Increasingly, women and people of color are the “new majority” in the workplace. In every major industry, in every major occupation, there are more women, more people of color, and more immigrants. In today’s economy, there is not only economic polarization, but racial polarization as well. Workers of color and immigrant workers consistently land on the bottom rungs of the employment ladders.

Racial and gender inequality at the workplace remains a serious problem. Studies show that a wage gap persists between men and women, and between white and minority workers. This wage gap persists even among workers who have comparable education. Women and

people of color must have more education and more experience than male and white workers in order to obtain comparable positions.

Studies reflect that African American and Latino households have higher unemployment and underemployment rates. African American and Latino households have incomes less than whites, are more likely to be living in poverty, are more likely to include families headed by single women, are less likely to be home owners, and have substantially less accumulated wealth than white households.

In the face of these challenges confronting the labor movement and the changing demographics of the workforce, the U.S. labor movement has unfortunately been slow to respond. The decline in unionization is a reflection of the failure of the U.S. labor movement to organize. Most union leaders today are older, white men who rose to positions of leadership in an era when unions were much more of an accepted presence in the workplace. Most of these leaders have defined their role as primarily serving their existing membership rather than organizing unorganized workers.

The Transformation of the Labor Movement

Since the 1995 election of the new leadership of the AFL-CIO, the labor movement has begun a major process of transformation. In the eight years since the new leadership of the AFL-CIO took office, we have witnessed more change than in the last several decades. There has been a shift in resources toward organizing, a move toward much greater public visibility and engagement in the public policy arena, and a commitment to reach out to the U.S. workforce at large, beyond the traditional base of existing union members. In addition, there has been a special commitment to reaching out to women, people of color, immigrant workers, and to young people. The new leadership of the AFL-CIO is also committed to building the labor movement as a broader social movement.

Some of the most impressive organizing campaigns in the country have been led by immigrant workers. The Justice for Janitors campaign of the Service Employees International Union successfully organized thousands of Latino immigrant janitors in Los Angeles, and the campaign later spread throughout the country. On June 15, 1990, at the height of the campaign, peaceful striking janitors were brutally beaten by the Los Angeles police department. Dozens were sent to the hospital, and one woman suffered a miscarriage as a result of the police attack. This incident brought national attention to the janitors' campaign and prompted the intervention of the Los Angeles mayor and city council.

The resulting union victory brought substantial increases in wages and, for the first time, health benefits for the janitors. Janitorial union membership in Los Angeles rose from about eighteen hundred to eight thousand from the beginning of the campaign to the successful unionization breakthroughs in 1990. This was the largest private-sector union organizing achievement involving Latino immigrants since the United Farm Workers' victories nearly two decades earlier.

In July 1990, twelve hundred Latino immigrant workers at the American Racing Equipment wheel factory in Los Angeles launched a wildcat strike. The workers had complained about horrible health and safety conditions, working with foundry ovens as hot as fifteen hundred degrees without adequate safety gear. In addition, management unilaterally attempted a speedup, forcing workers to work on two machines instead of one. The workers resisted the speedup and called a strike. The strike was mobilized and led by the workers themselves, independent of any direct union involvement.

Subsequently, the International Association of Machinists assisted in the organizing campaign. The workers exhibited tremendous courage and solidarity. Because the factory was a twenty-four-hour facility, meetings were held at all hours of the day and night. Workers would frequently sleep in the makeshift union hall on the concrete floor for a few hours at night in order to wake up in time to leaflet the early morning shift.

In an election held later that year, the workers overwhelmingly chose union representation. This was the largest factory organized in the Los Angeles area in over twenty years. The following year, the union successfully negotiated a contract that improved wages and working conditions.

In 1992, thousands of Mexican immigrant construction workers launched a wildcat strike that spread throughout five counties in Southern California. The "drywall workers," who install sheetrock panels to build homes and had suffered a steady erosion of their wages over the years, successfully shut down the residential construction industry throughout Southern California.

The strike resulted in the arrests of hundreds of striking workers, including undocumented immigrants who were deported. At one point, the Los Angeles police chased striking drywall workers onto the Hollywood Freeway near downtown Los Angeles. In response, the workers committed civil disobedience by blocking the freeway and causing a massive traffic jam that extended for miles and miles around.

After a five-month strike, the workers prevailed. The resulting contract doubled drywallers' wage rates in Los Angeles and surrounding counties and brought twenty-four hundred workers into the Carpenters' union.

The U.S. labor movement's single largest union victory in decades was won in Los Angeles in 1999, when seventy-four thousand home health care workers joined the Service Employees International Union. The home care workers are atypical workers who care for elderly and disabled patients in their homes. They serve as critical care providers within an overburdened public health care system and save the government millions and millions of dollars by allowing patients to stay at home who would otherwise require government paid hospitalization. Yet the irony is that these workers who play a critical role in health care delivery were denied health care benefits themselves.

After twelve years and a huge political campaign, this organizing campaign ended in victory. The home care workers have literally transformed the face of the labor movement, bringing low-wage workers who are predominantly women, people of color, and immigrants, into the ranks of the labor movement.

The U.S. labor movement was not always welcoming when it came to immigrant workers. Indeed, for generations the AFL-CIO had been at the forefront in advancing restrictive immigration policies. American unions had traditionally feared immigrant workers would lower their wages, erode working conditions, and be used by employers as strikebreakers. In the 1980s, the AFL-CIO advocated for legislation that successfully enacted "employer sanctions," imposing civil and criminal penalties on employers who knowingly hire undocumented immigrant workers.

The intent of employer sanctions was to penalize employers and, therefore, reduce the available jobs that were enticing undocumented workers to enter the country. In reality, it is the workers themselves who have been penalized. The impact of employer sanctions has intensified the exploitation and abuse of immigrant workers. The underground economy has grown accompanied by a complete lack of labor standards enforcement. Undocumented workers have virtually no recourse in the face of blatant violations of labor laws, including minimum wage, health and safety standards, and child labor protections.

In February 2000, the AFL-CIO made a dramatic change with regard to their policy on immigration. By unanimous decision, the AFL-CIO executive council passed a resolution calling for a new amnesty program to legalize the estimated six million undocumented immigrants in the country and to call for the repeal of employer sanctions. This decision sent shock waves through immigrant communities. In a complete role reversal, the AFL-CIO had now positioned itself as one of the major advocates for immigrant rights and immigration law reform in the country.

In September 2003, the AFL-CIO launched the Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride, a national mobilization to focus public attention on immigrant rights and the injustice of current

immigration policies. Inspired by the Freedom Rides of the Civil Rights Movement, immigrant workers and their allies organized bus caravans from nine major U.S. cities, culminating in a massive rally for immigrant rights in New York City. The three demands were:

- legalization and a road to citizenship for all immigrant workers in this country;
- the right to re-unite families;
- protection of worker rights on the job without regard to legal status; and
- protection of the civil rights and civil liberties of all.

This Freedom Ride represents a forward-looking vision of the U.S. labor movement in embracing workers of all colors and nationalities, regardless of their immigration status.

Fundamentally, in this era of globalization, capital knows no boundaries. The neoliberal policies of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund advocate unlimited flexibility for corporations to disregard worker rights, human rights, and the environment. Labor migration and immigration are global trends that will continue. Unfortunately, while capital extends internationally, unions are still trapped in national boundaries. And nationalism and chauvinism have caused unions to exclude and perpetuate the oppression and discrimination faced by immigrant workers.

The U.S. labor movement has a long history of racism and exclusion, but they have finally appreciated the need to embrace immigrant workers. This is not only the right thing to do, but it is also in their self-interest. Immigrant workers are not the enemy of unions; the forces of capital and neoliberalism are the enemy. And as long as capital can keep the working class divided by race, gender, and immigration status, workers will always lose.

The challenges facing the U.S. labor movement are indeed immense. U.S. unions are fighting for their very survival in the world's only remaining superpower and are under constant attack from a hostile right-wing government. The Bush administration represents a threat not only to workers in the United States, but also to workers throughout the world. The policies of

neoliberalism, war, and imperialist aggression are a threat to the peace and stability of workers everywhere.

Now more than ever, the U.S. labor movement must stand in unity with labor movements throughout the world for peace, social and economic justice, and international worker solidarity.

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