

The meaning of social justice solidarity is clear in the words of a noted Colombian trade unionist, who stated, "The most important thing that North American activists seeking to support trade unions in Colombia can do is to work to change U.S. policy towards Colombia, especially its emphasis on military and police aid."<sup>17</sup> Colombian workers are asking that their fellow workers in the United States look beyond common economic concerns in uniting with them. Instead, workers around the world are asking U.S. trade unionists to make a leap to social justice solidarity by addressing a wide range of issues, including:

- immigration and the rights of immigrant workers who cross borders seeking a livelihood (often because their nations' economies are in disarray because of interference by countries of the Global North)
- economic decisions by corporations of the Global North that render the economies of entire regions—for example, the Caribbean—unstable
- political repression and abuse of human rights, such as the actions faced by workers in countries like Swaziland and Burma/Myanmar, who may not have a common employer
- support for regional trade alliances in the Global South that strengthen workers' position and improve their nations' abilities to achieve genuine self-determination
- opposition to illegal wars of aggression, such as the current one in Iraq, as well as opposition to threatening behavior by the U.S. government toward countries that will not accept U.S. direction
- unity against neoliberal globalization and its impact in the United States and abroad
- unity against common employers and against the policies of governments that undermine democracy and workers' rights

This level of solidarity goes beyond one-shot agreements between partners; it requires principle-driven strategic pacts. What principles should drive social justice solidarity? At the head of the list are nonaggression among nations, national self-determination, workers' rights, human rights, and recognition of the need for a common global agenda—demonstrating at least a minimum level of unity—for the dispossessed.<sup>18</sup>

## CHAPTER 19

### REALIZING SOCIAL JUSTICE UNIONISM

#### *Strategies for Transformation*

#### PUTTING THE LEFT FOOT FORWARD

The irony of the current situation is that the U.S. union movement must become part of a new labor movement. To do so, unions must move left; they have no alternative.

The Gompers compromise unfolded as national capitalism, and later imperialism, took hold in the United States. The bulk of the U.S. movement (excluding the Industrial Workers of the World and other forces that followed them on the left) did not see a close connection between the imperial adventures of the United States and the development of U.S. capitalism. Production largely took place in the United States, though businesses had foreign investments. At least through the end of World War II, however, overseas investment focused largely on obtaining raw materials and new markets rather than on relocating U.S.-bound production. Rubber to make tires, for instance, came from Brazil and later from Asia, but the tires were produced in Akron, Ohio, and other production centers in the Global North.

This situation has fundamentally changed, which is why we argue that the material basis for international working-class solidarity is greater than at any point since the development of capitalism. Nevertheless, the existence of a material basis does not ensure success. Moving from the general recognition that international solidarity is a good

idea to its realization will require changes in ideological orientation as well as practical programmatic steps.

To bring social justice trade unionism into existence, we must change not only the leadership of existing organized labor but also the relationship between the existing trade union movement and other progressive social forces (for example, workers' centers, independent unions, and progressive social clubs). Such change will not happen in the absence of a conscious Left force, as we have seen in the Change to Win Federation, which lacks Left leadership and a left-wing orientation. Despite having some outstanding leaders, CTW remains trapped in a Gompers-style view, albeit one that is dressed up in twenty-first-century stylings.

Do unions therefore have to become left-wing organizations? At the risk of avoiding the question, we offer the following answer:

- Unions, as united fronts of workers, develop a set of real-world politics and practices through both external and internal struggles. They are not, however, political parties.
- The Gompersian perspective has failed, even in CTW's revised form. It cannot explain the current reality of the class struggle, and any answers it may try to provide are fundamentally dead ends.
- The predatory nature of U.S. capitalism, both at home and across the world, is forcing workers and their organizations to make some tough choices based on a stark reality: capital has eliminated the possibility for significant capital-labor cooperation. The ramifications of the end of the so-called social contract that had been established in the 1940s—because of the victories of workers combined with the dominant position of U.S. capitalism—have largely been denied by the bulk of the leadership of organized labor. Their approach continues to hold out hope for a return to an earlier understanding.
- Unions cannot replace political parties or other sectoral social movements. Nor should they conceive of themselves as special interest groups. In attempting to represent a class of people—literally—they should act in their members' and potential members' interests in multiple arenas. No arena should be immune to unionism.

Having asserted that the union movement needs to move left, we need to define "left." The Left embraces a critique of capitalism that recognizes the system's inability to meet the objectives of human rights, workers' rights, environmental justice, and other issues. For unions, moving to the

left means pushing the envelope to expand worker control over the workplace and the work process and to expand democracy beyond its formal limits. Unions need to recognize that democracy is not simply a matter of multiparty elections but truly embraces the rule of the people. The Left is the force that expands democracy—or fights for its expansion—against those forces, including but not limited to corporations, attempting to narrow the public sphere. A Left-led union movement must be prepared to fight for every reform that strengthens the working class and other sectors of society subject to oppression.

If the union movement is to shift further to the left, the left-wing forces within the movement must achieve organizational coherence. One of the biggest mistakes leftists made in the 1980s was to assume that they could influence change through individual action. Rather than seek the development of a genuine left-wing presence in organized labor, individual leftists often shifted their politics and their practice to become acceptable to the existing labor movement. At that point, for many such individuals, being on the left became little more than a wink to acknowledge one's past affiliation; it did not signify adherence to a current belief system or practice.

### MOVING TOWARD SOCIAL JUSTICE UNIONISM

Though we could easily devote an entire book to ideas for winning the U.S. trade union movement to social justice unionism, in this section, we offer suggestions in two areas: the key steps necessary to advance a practice of social justice unionism for the twenty-first century and the vehicles necessary to move that practice forward. In addition to the working people's assemblies and social-political blocs we have already mentioned, below are suggestions for other areas of change.

#### Union Transformation

As we have pointed out, most of today's unions have been shaped by the Gompers legacy and anticommunism. Unions are not necessarily becoming either less or more democratic, but they are evolving. The early movement under Gompers generally combined decentralized authoritarianism with racism and sexism. National and international affiliates were highly autonomous, as were the local unions.

The purge of Left-led unions strengthened a corporate culture within the official union movement that discouraged creativity, democracy

(particularly dissent), and any broad sense of class struggle. Though clamor for union reform emerged in the late 1980s in the face of crisis and reached a fever pitch in 1995 with John Sweeney's election as president of the AFL-CIO, the reformers did not envision a full transformation. In the early to mid-1990s, the notion of union transformation focused on retooling existing unions to make them more effective *organizing machines*. Even then, divisions existed among the advocates of transformation, who formed two camps one might call *technicians* and *reconstructionists*.

The technicians considered union reform largely a technical matter calling for straightforward steps such as changes in leadership or the introduction of new tools or approaches to growth. The reconstructionists, in contrast, considered transformation of the organizations as a whole, looking at fundamental changes in the way the unions conducted their business.

Though the technicians and the reconstructionists had significant differences, they shared certain ideological precepts that no one challenged. Nevertheless, any changes that have taken place have largely been under the hegemony and leadership of the technicians. Ideology and worldview, such as SEIU's, have no formal and explicit role, though the ideological orientation of SEIU has been changing since the split in the AFL-CIO (in ways that many reformers did not anticipate).<sup>1</sup>

To bring about social justice unionism, union transformation must take a very different shape. Reformers must see transformation not merely as a matter of technique but as a campaign of purpose and objectives. The relationship between the member and his/her union must fundamentally change.

Union transformation must begin with the notion that the union has to build a broader labor movement as part of the process of introducing progressive change. Such change is not only a domestic matter—one of wages, hours, and working conditions—but also an imperative to improve the lives and power of working-class people. These goals in turn call for reevaluating the structure and functioning of the union, looking at everything from internal education to organizing targets, the union's relationship to various political actors, and international solidarity.

Advancing a practice of social justice unionism requires an intense process of strategic planning and so-called power analysis. This process needs to focus on matters of class struggle, taking as the starting point the state of the working class generally and, specifically, the state of the working class represented by the relevant union(s). Such an examination

does not presume that unions are the only or main player when considering the state of the working class in a particular context. (Activist-theorists Anthony Thigpen [from Los Angeles] and Richard Healy [Washington, D.C., and Boston] have helped raise awareness of these important tools of analysis as instruments for struggle.) On a movement-wide scale, the AFGE coalition proposal was attempting to promote this sort of thinking and orientation (see appendix A).

The next step is to examine how the union currently operates and to explore ways to structure it so that it can advance the objectives identified in the earlier analysis. This step is complicated. Given that the union is, except in so-called right-to-work states or under agency shop or fee-paying agreements, a nonvoluntary organization of workers with often vastly different points of view, real transformation cannot be imposed from the top.<sup>2</sup> Thus, a process must unfold to win a political mandate from the membership for social justice unionism. Many leftists elected to office have assumed that their election signals the members' endorsement of a Left agenda, but members may have simply been endorsing the individual or the slate or registering opposition to the other side. Achievement of a membership mandate is a more complicated process because it must win over a significant portion of the membership to a new approach. Genuine membership education must be a major component of this process.

Transformation is a long-term effort and has no shortcuts. Effective and inspiring leadership may bring about changes and victories, but it does not necessarily lead to lasting change. Not until a significant portion of the membership embraces the new style of unionism can reformers say a union is on the road to social justice unionism. Consider, for example, the late Machinists president William Wimpisinger, who was an open democratic socialist and a friend of many a progressive cause but oversaw a union with a complicated, if not ignominious, history in matters of race. Wimpisinger was elected not because he was a socialist or because members wanted to transform the International Association of Machinists into a socialist-led union. He was elected largely *despite* his politics and because he was a "good trade unionist." Moving a union toward the embrace of social justice unionism ultimately calls for bringing about internal cultural and political change. And for this change to occur, reformers need to win a mandate for change from the members.

Transformation challenges the thinking and practice of the union on issues of race and gender. It requires concrete steps to shift power and power relationships within the locals, central labor councils, state federations, and ultimately the national labor federations. Placing visionaries in

key positions is only one step in the process; the overall organization must turn its attention to the often-ignored or disenfranchised sectors of the workforce and of the wider population. When Karen Nussbaum was the director of the AFL-CIO Working Women's Department, she repeatedly pointed out that the union movement is the largest organization of women in the United States. Yet, she noted, the union movement did not act as such, and it has still not oriented itself toward women. As part of its transformation, the union movement must become a vehicle through which oppressed groups, such as women and people of color, can advance their demands for freedom. This approach contrasts with the current tendency to look at these groups simply as several constituencies among many.

### Public-Sector Unionism in the South and Southwest

In the 1960s and early 1970s, some interesting experiments in health-care and public-sector organizing began to emerge in the South. Led mainly by Local 1199 of the National Union of Health and Hospital Workers and the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, these efforts—such as the famous Memphis sanitation workers' struggle involving Dr. Martin Luther King—fused economic struggles for workers' rights with political struggles for Black freedom.<sup>3</sup> These efforts petered out, and an incredible opportunity to reshape southern organizing was lost. The union movement has never replicated this effort.

The public sector in the South and the Southwest offers interesting opportunities to link electoral activism, community-based work (including demands for reforms in the public sector), and workers' rights. It provides a means to organize African American workers and communities (and increasingly Latino immigrant communities) in the South and Chicano and Native American workers and communities in the Southwest.

Yet, if carried out in traditional trade unionist ways, an organizing effort in these regions will inevitably fail. In contrast to the AFL-CIO's discussions of southern organizing in 2000, any new efforts in the South must recognize the centrality of the African American struggle, the newly emerging struggles of Latino immigrants, and the role of community-based organizations. With this focus, organizing departs from traditional union organizing, instead following along the lines of the organizing-cities concept and becoming a political-geographic project that embraces a variety of forces. To achieve this objective, unions cannot simply call

upon their traditional allies to show up and wave; they must engage with these allies in formulating a coherent strategy. In the South and Southwest, they can draw upon the African American, Latino immigrant, and Chicano and Native American movements. The pursuit of workers' rights, then, has to go beyond institution building in the unions and become a movement for social advancement and transformation.

### Nonmajority Unionism

*Nonmajority unionism* is the theory and practice of building a union among workers regardless of whether the union can officially conduct collective bargaining with an employer. Normally, the union builds its membership and operates in a workplace in which it has not yet achieved the 50 percent-plus-one vote necessary to be certified as the bargaining representative for the workers.

Various unions have experimented with nonmajority unionism. Unions organizing in the South—particularly in the public sector, which provides no right to unionize, and in high-tech industries—have undertaken organizational efforts that go beyond the scope of traditional trade union activities.

Though nonmajority unions have operated in one form or another since the beginning of unionism, national interest in this concept revived in 1990 with the publication of an essay by Clyde Summers, "Unions without Majority—A Black Hole?"<sup>4</sup> This article suggested that the union movement explore new and creative ways of organizing and providing representation, particularly using Section 7 of the National Labor Relations Act. Summers's comments generated a great degree of interest, particularly among activists working in right-to-work states. A more recent article explores the application of this concept to collective bargaining.<sup>5</sup> Such articles supply the theory to back up the experience of organizations such as North Carolina's Black Workers for Justice, South Carolina's Carolina Alliance for Fair Employment, and the Mississippi Alliance of State Employees/Communications Workers of America Local 3570.

With the passage of the Wagner Act in the 1930s, most unions chose to focus on achieving the 50 percent-plus-one votes necessary to receive National Labor Relations Board certification, which enabled them to engage in formal bargaining. Though activists in the South and Southwest faced risks in building unions that had nonmajority status (due to right-to-work laws), or that could slip into this status, their concerns

were not elevated to the national level for discussion and strategizing for a long time, a fact that speaks volumes about the state of organized labor. This neglect persisted even during the Sweeney years at both SEIU and the AFL-CIO. While Sweeney was president of SEIU, he supported certain nonmajority union experiments, such as Local 1985 of SEIU (the Georgia State Employees Union). However, the development of nonmajority unions in other portions of the South was not central to the SEIU's growth strategy. During the Sweeney years at the AFL-CIO—including during the tenure of Richard Bensinger as organizing director—no special efforts took place to explore nonmajority unionism as a movementwide strategy for growth, particularly in the less-hospitable geographic and industry sectors.

To succeed, nonmajority unionism requires significant commitment by the parent union—in the form of subsidies. The idea of constituting an organization with no guaranteed dues checkoff and, more than likely, a fluctuating membership without external support is untenable.

The local union must also align itself with the idea of social justice unionism, functioning as a component of a movement. Thus, it must not only provide technical resources for members but also adopt a continuous organizing mode (organizing both internally and externally). Examples of this approach include Local 1985 of SEIU in Georgia and CWA's work in Mississippi and Texas. These efforts, however, are only incompletely tied into a significant organizing effort in their respective states; the unions largely operate apart from other social movement organizations and activists (except when those organizations and activists can help advance the objectives of the union itself).

### **Redefining Worker Control of the Unions**

The matter of internal democracy has haunted the union movement since its inception. The issue is not limited to who should have the right to vote. It goes to the heart of how the organization operates.

In recent years, unions have increasingly moved toward organizational consolidation. Local unions are merging into other local unions, becoming regional institutions and losing their local flavor. National/international unions are merging, often in ways that defy any straightforward explanation. For example, if through consolidation, a local union crosses state boundaries and its members number in the tens of thousands, how can a member become sufficiently well-known to run for office or to influence the organization in other ways? In fact, consol-

idation tends to distance the organization from its members. This situation is unfortunate, given that consolidation is not the only way to accumulate resources and mount a united front against a common employer.

The United Auto Workers and the Teamsters have maintained local unions with roots in particular communities while facilitating regional and even nationwide bargaining through joint bargaining councils that bring together local unions under collective-bargaining agreements. The local unions, being local in fact as well as name, enable members to make many decisions directly rather than through representatives, thus facilitating more direct democracy at the lowest level of the union structure. SEIU, in contrast, has built a structure of statewide consolidated unions. Some SEIU jurisdictions facilitate organizing within a labor market such as building services (janitors)—Local 1877 in California is one example—whereas others, such as Local 668 in Pennsylvania, appear to be nothing more than amalgamations of unions. In statewide locals like 668, the local chapters have limited decision-making power and policies, and the power to allocate resources is in the hands of representatives at the state level. In other unions with similar structures, the average member has virtually no avenue for participating directly, and dissidents in particular have no way to create opposition to the incumbent leadership. Our experience also shows that getting statewide bureaucratic organizations like consolidated unions to respond to local political situations—for example, by providing financial support for a local political campaign or by passing local Solidarity Charters—is a slow and difficult process.<sup>6</sup>

The SEIU model, which many unionists hold up as the only approach to organization, is certainly not the only solution to problems of competitive markets and aggressive employers. The UAW and Teamsters, by mandating joint bargaining councils, have demonstrated this fact. Many unions already have such institutions, and an organization can constitutionally mandate common bargaining among unions dealing with the same employer. Such a proposal is no less efficient, at least theoretically, than a forced merger. A forced or even a voluntary merger can create culture clashes, including clashes growing out of geographical differences.<sup>7</sup>

On a different front, too many unions either smash factions within the union or otherwise undermine the ability of members to express dissent. Contrary to the idea that factions inhibit democracy and create chaos, noted scholars Judith Stepan-Norris and Maurice Zeitlin, in a remarkable study of Left-led unions in the 1940s, came to exactly the

opposite conclusion.<sup>8</sup> They found that a competitive political atmosphere in unions can strengthen an organization's democratic culture as well as increase members' enthusiasm about participation.<sup>9</sup> Insofar as members see the union as an organization apart from them, they will treat it as such.

As part of a cultural change, social justice unionism would promote debate and referenda. In general today, decisions within unions are currently made at the top, whether the top is the leadership of the national/international union or the heads of local or regional bodies. Leaders regularly make decisions without membership consultation, the assumption being that the members, by voting in these leaders, have given them a mandate to do as they see fit.

Instead, unions could move toward a system of internal dialogue followed by membership votes. These debates and votes could determine which political candidates the union will endorse or what the union's stand will be on a question of U.S. foreign policy. Such an approach would be dramatically different from the experience in most unions today. Thus, it would require a dramatically different approach toward membership education.

### **What's the Point of Member Education?**

A look at the budgets of most unions and union bodies reveals that membership education is not a priority. The programs that come closest to membership education are those at the George Meany Center/National Labor College, building trades apprenticeship programs, and training programs on specific union skills. Though unions have periodically launched efforts to expand the conception of education—for example, the AFL-CIO's Common Sense Economics program—most of these programs have been short-lived and underfunded.

What is membership education? It is not a PowerPoint presentation, though PowerPoint may play a role. Membership education is largely conceptual and secondarily technical. It aims to provide a framework that members can use to analyze their experiences and guide actions in their own interests. Thus, it deals with the big picture. It does not start and end with tips on how to handle a grievance or even how to organize. It needs to begin with certain basic concepts: What is a union? How do employers operate, and why do they seem to have the upper hand? What is capitalism, and what are its impacts on workers in the United States and overseas? What role do race and gender play in the workplace and

in the larger society? From such a conceptual base, education can move to specific skills building or more in-depth conceptual education.

Membership education is about recognizing and developing leaders. Thus, it should encourage members to question, express differences of opinion, and debate. To the extent to which the leadership of a union fears debate, the organization will stagnate.

Membership education, however, must be in the lifeblood of the union. It cannot sit on the margins and be called upon only when an internal problem must be settled. A prototype for good integration of education was the Construction Organizing Membership Education and Training (COMET) program, introduced into the building trades in the early 1990s to promote understanding of the conditions causing the unions in the building trades to lose strength. COMET was a path-breaking program, though it did not go far enough in tackling one of the most problematic aspects of the history and practice of the building trades: race. Nonetheless, it raised people's consciousness and demonstrated the immense possibilities for membership education.

Too many unions see membership education, if they think of it at all, as a means of communicating the message of the leadership to the membership. To the extent to which education programs perform this function, they promote cynicism. Membership education is not value neutral, but it needs to encourage the dialogue and debate necessary for participants to take ownership of the ideas that emerge. If members strongly disagree with the direction of the leadership, the union is better off if leaders find out this fact in the course of education rather than in the midst of a struggle. This open approach to member education not only recognizes the existence of different points of view within the union but also reveals contradictory ideas within the minds of many members. Thus, a member who is strongly anticorporate may also be a right-wing populist and hold racist ideas. Another member may be a staunch fighter against racist harassment but oppose affirmative action. We cannot expect consistency. The union educator's job is to help provide a framework for members to sort out their ideas and contribute to a consistent union message while struggling to win over workers to the theory and practice of social justice unionism.

### **Central Labor Councils**

One of the most intriguing ideas to emerge in the early part of the Sweeney administration was the notion of recasting central labor councils

as *central workers' councils*. Unfortunately, this notion was never acted upon despite ongoing discussion among CLC leaders. This concept would not simply have introduced a semantic change. The thinking was that the central labor councils needed to open their doors to organizations other than unions.

Social justice unionism would take this notion of central labor councils as a starting point and then rethink the overall roles of CLCs, moving beyond the ideas of the Union Cities program and even the New Alliance program. Reforming CLCs would be complicated, however, given that national and international union bureaucracies are ambivalent about the councils, preferring to relegate them to a supportive role in specific projects the unions designate.

Thus, a struggle must unfold over the future role of the central labor councils. Labor councils should reconstitute themselves as the local representative bodies of working people. As such, they should be in the forefront of workers' struggles for economic justice and democracy.

The Sweeney administration attempted to shift and broaden the focus of the central labor councils, though it was willing to push the envelope of reform only so far. Yet one can think of myriad possibilities for central labor councils in an era of social justice unionism. The Los Angeles County Labor Federation re-created itself by building on the Union Cities organizing initiative, the living-wage movement, and the immigrant-rights movement. The federation set down roots in the immigrant community and linked the immigrant community and the African American community. These links translated into political power for all participants. The King County Central Labor Council in Seattle, at the time led by Ron Judd, was an active player in the anti-WTO mobilizations in 1999. These two initiatives are examples of excellent work, but the CLCs can push the envelope further:

- Working people's assemblies should, in fact, be a principal object of the central labor councils, with the CLCs serving as a major organizing center to move the process.
- CLCs could open their doors to other working-class organizations, thus shifting from a council of unions to a council of working-class organizations. The CLCs could be a vehicle for mutual support and coordination, as well as for joint campaigns.
- CLCs could play a major role in regional economic development, representing the point of view of the working class in economic development projects that are already on the books as well as

advancing new projects that are proworker and propeople—such as the Boston-based Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative.<sup>10</sup>

- Political action, always central to the CLCs, could be expanded. For example, CLCs could expand the Labor/Neighbor model into a permanent organization centered on specific communities. The Labor/Neighbor program began as an organization constituted by union members, but CLCs could expand the program's reach to include other neighbors who support the organization's political agenda. Ultimately, the union movement must think about the social-political bloc that must be built, and that bloc must be a neo-Rainbow-type organization. Labor/Neighbor programs can contribute to the development of such blocs as well as to the development of a neo-Rainbow organization (or series of such organizations).
- Labor councils must function independently in their jurisdictions and not be subordinate to any national or international union. Mandatory affiliation of local unions must be enforced to ensure that labor councils have sufficient resources. Labor councils should receive additional funding from state federations or the AFL-CIO based on their planned or achieved actions and on the populations or growth projections of their jurisdictions.
- Labor councils should be able to forge links, even across state lines, to facilitate multiunion or geographically larger campaigns.
- Central labor councils could incorporate Jobs with Justice chapters as full affiliates. Thus, JwJ could assist in CLC planning and provide support, and CLCs could encourage local unions to recruit member-activists to join JwJ.

These actions represent a break from the notion of CLCs as clubs or trade associations. The CLCs would become the hub or prime mover of working-class activism within specific geographic areas.

### The Role of the National Labor Center or Federation

Before the split within the AFL-CIO, the role of the national labor center or federation was a topic of considerable discussion. However, no one addressed the questions raised by the coalition headed by the American Federation of Government Employees (see chapter 15).

National labor federations in the United States have typically been loose-knit organizations. Their first priority is to represent the interests

of the affiliate unions.<sup>11</sup> Each affiliate, operating within the Gompers perspective, defines its existence and its interests largely by its own constituency.

National labor centers tend to be shaped not only by their affiliates but also by the major struggles in their respective countries. In South Africa, for instance, the Congress of South African Trade Unions has considerable influence over its affiliates, not because of bureaucratic measures but largely because of its roots and leadership role in the anti-apartheid struggle. COSATU's leadership, in other words, was earned, not legislated.

National labor centers are shaped, by implication, by ideological decisions as well. Thus, a national labor center that largely seeks to speak for and represent the working class may operate differently than one that acts more as a commercial trade association.

The debate over the role of organizing in the AFL-CIO was not only a turf war but also a debate about vision. The central question should have been whether the AFL-CIO—as an institution—could and would undertake organizing in areas in which the affiliates were inactive. Thus, the AFL-CIO might have undertaken organizing in cities, such as Los Angeles under the Los Angeles Manufacturing Action Project, or in underserved regions, such as the South and Southwest, to build the presence of labor. It could also have broadened the scope of organizing, as it has in Working America, but also organizing the unemployed and underemployed.

The restriction of the AFL-CIO to politics—which is a false claim, actually—was the decision of the affiliates rather than of one leader. Efforts to involve the AFL-CIO directly in organizing, including geographic organizing projects as well as the Organizing Fund (a fund set aside to match affiliate commitments to major organizing campaigns), have largely failed, not mainly because of the AFL-CIO leadership but because of affiliates' perceptions of these projects and ambivalence about an AFL-CIO role. As we have noted, some of the affiliates most critical of AFL-CIO organizing efforts were those that, in 2005, criticized the AFL-CIO for its lack of commitment to organizing.

Defining national labor centers' roles in the realms of politics, organizing, policy, and other matters must begin with discussion and debate between the leaders of the affiliates. Moreover, the first step in defining these roles is to analyze the situation on the ground to determine what is needed.

We believe that in addition to coordinating organizing efforts and initiating experimental organizing efforts where affiliates may not cur-

rently be involved, a national labor center in the United States can play a major role in developing an independent political organization, coordinating membership education programs, and uniting with other national labor centers in addressing global capital (and U.S. foreign policy). It should also help position the union movement as part of the larger labor movement.

### VEHICLES FOR TRANSFORMATION

The ideas we advance here are antithetical to the current practice of trade unionism in the United States. Though we have highlighted specific activities that give us hope for the future, the reality is that an alliance of the pragmatists and the traditionalists still holds hegemony over organized labor. Moreover, though the trade union Left has allies on the outside—for example, in the workers' center movement—the Left must recognize that it begins from a position of weakness in attempting to bring change to the trade union movement.

Since the 1980s, various unions, particularly those committed to growth, have been willing to hire some leftists in various positions, including prominent positions. Nevertheless, this activity looked more like the recruitment of gunslingers than like a sea change in trade unionism. Leftists have had a certain amount of room to maneuver as long as they have not strayed outside the Gompers/anticommunist worldview. Although Red-baiting has decreased significantly, particularly since John Sweeney took office, no existing union or formal labor body is consistently practicing social justice unionism (including social justice solidarity).

This situation presents a strategic problem. In view of the weakness of the political Left in the United States, which is made up of small organizations with limited influence and large numbers of unaffiliated individuals, many individual leftists and their allies have chosen to be loners, doing the best they can as individuals within the union movement. Some other individuals and groups of individuals have taken an alternative, more activist path—for example, by advancing workers' centers or other independent organizations, often in opposition to the existing union movement.

The next step, which is risky because of the U.S. trade union movement's intense discomfort with dissent, is to build a movement linking those inside and outside the trade union movement who embrace a vision of social justice unionism (under whatever name). This movement must explicitly be part of building a new labor movement, not by

ignoring the existing one but by transforming it—organizationally and politically. Not only will this transformation require a fight for leadership but it will need to introduce a new practice of *labor unionism*—one that has as much to say to the unemployed worker as it does to the assembly-line worker, as much to say to women as to men, and as much to say to people of color as to whites. It must also be truly internationalist or global in its outlook and practice. At a moment when right-wing populism and various forms of economic isolationism have a base within the working class and the middle strata of U.S. society, a critical need exists for a movement with a global perspective that situates U.S. workers' struggle in a broader context.

Oddly, had the struggle within the AFL-CIO between 2003 and 2005 been about these issues, then even if the split had still occurred, it would have had a qualitatively different look. The separation would have stemmed from fundamentally different visions of the relationship of the union movement to the rest of the working class both in the United States and in the rest of the world.

Given that the issues of the split have not been settled—indeed, few debaters even addressed them—the time has come to advance the debate, whether the leaders are comfortable with the discussion or not. What good are leaders who have no followers?

### CONCLUSION

Neoconservative cultural strategies have played a major role in pounding the cultural terrain of the U.S. working class. An increasing sense of alienation and hopelessness has moved U.S. working people from a notion of democracy that promoted civic and collective participation to one that promotes individual behavior.<sup>12</sup> Studies indicate that voluntary associations in the workplace and community can act as “schools of democracy.”<sup>13</sup> Unions can operate as models of democracy that reflect the importance of citizenship, duties, responsibilities, and rights. But to do so, they must militate against neoliberal market-based notions of democracy. Unionism today, as in the past, requires activists to confront a bewildering array of community cultures that often interpenetrate and play themselves out in terms of class, race, gender, sexual orientation, and immigration status—and that inevitably determine the success of the union/labor movements. Union cultures are not homogeneous, nor should they be. What is required for the revitalization and growth of the

union/labor movement is a compelling set of articulated values (such as inclusion, militancy, class politics, and internationalism) that are institutionalized at both the national and the local levels and that are reflected in broad-based governmental policies and decisions. A political project of this nature would permit the union movement to create intersections with progressive social movements and transcend the divisions between working people. The political front created by such a project would produce the leverage to take on the state and demand broader political reform and changes in labor laws.<sup>14</sup> Such a project should be cultivated and allowed to blossom in hundreds of local venues, unencumbered by the restrictive cultural filters imposed by “pure and simple business unionism.” This project would also require the Left to reconstitute itself in a visible institution, beginning in a network and ultimately taking the form of a political organization or party that transcends the lines dividing labor from other social movements.

Traditional unionism has typically focused on a limited goal: redistribution of some of the social surplus away from corporate profits and into the hands of workers. Even the New Voice's 1995–96 rallying cry, “America needs a raise,” speaks to this limited goal. However, from a leftist perspective, this approach raises two major questions. First, is this goal systematically attainable in the long run, especially if increasing the workers' share interferes with capital accumulation? Specifically, unless we are actually challenging profit accumulation and the distribution of the social surplus, we will, at best, find ourselves in a situation in which certain sectors of the working class can or try to carve out a favorable return for themselves, at the expense of other workers, by maintaining exclusiveness. In this way, they can take a bigger cut of the wage allocation, while other workers, in the United States and abroad, must take less.

Second, and following from the previous point, is social equality achievable under capitalism, or should the working class (and the union and labor movements) plan to challenge capitalist institutions, including the fundamentally exploitative character of the wage relationship? We have found that even union leaders who consider themselves socialists believe that raising socialist issues is wildly idealistic and impractical. They put off these questions to the indefinite future, believing that they need to win more power or organize more workers before raising these issues. However, because they are losing power rapidly rather than gaining it, their struggle for organizational survival has taken precedence. We

suggest that keeping the higher goals in mind is a prerequisite for winning real power. As long as unions operate solidly within capitalism, accepting its basic rules and premises as permanent, they may be marching to their doom. The current crisis should lead unionists not to narrow our vision but to broaden it.<sup>15</sup>

Our conclusion about the future of unions is not as unconventional as one might think. A provocative piece in the German magazine *Spiegel* forces readers to consider such an idea.<sup>16</sup> Writer Gabor Steingart, completing a review of globalization, soberly concludes that unions in the Global North are dead—that is, that they can do nothing to regain the power they once held. Looking at the situation through the glasses of Gompersism, Steingart is probably correct. There is no exit. Only by adopting an approach that begins with an entirely different set of assumptions can we hope to see the renaissance of a labor movement in the United States.

Thus, a piece of our conclusion—which for some will be unsettling—is that a Left, anticapitalist analysis and a reconstituted Left are essential for the renewal of labor and the reconstruction of trade unionism. Try as some may to erase the role of the Left in the successful historical moments of U.S. (or even global) trade unionism, their effort will fail. A rigorous analysis of the current situation needs a Left framework, and the movement needs the inspiration of a Left vision.

One development that has changed the interpretation of leftist, anticapitalist theories is the change in the international situation. One of the major critiques of the Communist Party during the Cold War was that the party allegedly served as a fifth column for the Soviet Union. With the demise of the USSR and the movement of the People's Republic of China away from socialism, we argue that though the left wing has been influenced by both these international experiments in socialism, the Left alternative now developing in the United States must be internationalist in perspective and promote the interests of all workers, not just U.S. workers. Today's globalized capitalism permits the rebuilding of the international Left on a much broader front than was realizable in past decades. Evidence of this trend appears in the growing popularity of the World Social Forum and, within the Americas, the recent rise of leftist and center-left governments in Brazil, Venezuela, Uruguay, Argentina, Chile, and possibly other countries south of the Rio Grande in the near future.<sup>17</sup> The growing interest in Left alternatives to global capitalist

orthodoxy is directly attributable to the wider array of international social movements aligning themselves against imperialism and against powers seeking to create global empires for the benefit of the world's corporate elite. We hope that this book will be a useful guide to those seeking to reconstitute such a Left and to build a globally conscious social justice unionism in the United States.