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Richard W. Hurd
Cornell University, rwh8@cornell.edu

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Contesting the Dinosaur Image: The Labor Movement's Search for a Future

Abstract

[Excerpt] As labor contests the dinosaur image it will find no easy answers. Hard work, careful assessment of options, and a willingness to take risks are all required. Without widespread experimentation and a significant reallocation of resources to organizing, extinction awaits.

Keywords

labor movement, unions, organizing

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“As labor contests the dinosaur image it will find no easy answers. Hard work, careful assessment of options, and a willingness to take risks are all required. Without widespread experimentation and a significant reallocation of resources to organizing, extinction awaits.”



Richard W. Hurd is Professor and Director of Labor Studies at Cornell's ILR School. Widely quoted in the media on labor issues, he is the coeditor of *Restoring the Promise of American Labor Law* and *Organizing to Win*.

Richard W. Hurd

CONTESTING THE DINOSAUR IMAGE

The Labor Movement's Search for a Future

Prologue

IT IS MARCH 1986 AND LABOR EDUCATORS FROM UNIONS AND universities have gathered for their annual conference.¹ This year's site is the magnificent training facility of the Seafarers International Union (SIU) in Piney Point, Maryland. Hundreds of acres of rolling farmland give way to a cluster of buildings that could easily be mistaken for the campus of an exclusive liberal arts college. The grounds border the Potomac River at its widest point, just before it merges with the Chesapeake Bay. Constructed during the SIU's heyday, the facility is well maintained but nearly deserted. A large old freighter and a few other rusty boats are moored to the docks for infrequent use in apprenticeship training. This monument to the past tells of union decline. Though a financially secure institution for now, the SIU lost 70 percent of its membership from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s as foreign flag vessels took over shipping to and from U.S. ports.

It is ironic and yet strangely appropriate that the AFL-CIO Education Department has chosen Piney Point as the site for discussions on the future of organized labor. The conference invites partici-

pants to concentrate their attention on *The Changing Situation of Workers and Their Unions*, a report issued in February 1985 by the AFL-CIO Executive Council. Widely viewed as a blueprint for labor's response to crisis, *The Changing Situation* has stimulated both debate and action in the thirteen months since its release.

Two highlights of the conference reflect the dominant interpretations which vie quietly for acceptance. The keynote address by Tom Donahue, secretary-treasurer of the AFL-CIO, itemizes initiatives inspired by the report. A credit card program negotiated with a major bank offers union members favorable interest rates. Several experiments are under way to recruit "associate members" among workers with no union representation. The AFL-CIO Department of Organization and Field Services is coordinating a nationwide organizing campaign against Blue Cross and Blue Shield, with eight national unions participating. Changes are being considered that would make local unions' membership in and dues payments to state AFL-CIO councils mandatory rather than voluntary. Three pilot projects are attempting to raise members' awareness of and support for labor's political agenda. For Donahue *The Changing Situation* means structural changes designed to strengthen the institutions of organized labor.

I would like to thank Nick Salvatore, Harry Katz, and Jeff Grabelsky for detailed feedback on an earlier version.

At a workshop titled “New Organizing Techniques,” a different vision is set forth by Joe Uehlein, director of special projects for the Industrial Union Department. Uehlein interprets the essence of *The Changing Situation* in one word: “Organize!” He warns that organizing means more than selling the services of the union to prospective clients. Instead, campaigns should respond to the needs and concerns of the workers, and most of the actual organizing should be done by rank-and-file committees. He calls for unions to “burn the printing presses” and to involve prospective members in plant-gate activities, rallies, and songs. He describes a strategic approach based on power structure analysis, and recalls Sun Zsu’s advice in *The Art of War*, “Know yourself and know your enemy and you will endure 1,000 wars.” He also suggests that unions emulate Saul Alinsky’s practice of picking tactics that are “winnable, and winnable quickly.” For Uehlein *The Changing Situation* is a license to reconsider labor’s methods and to promote a strategy for revival built upon activism, mobilization, and organizing.

Historical Foundation: The Servicing Model of Unionism

In order to appreciate the complexity of the strategic dilemma facing union leaders in recent years, it is necessary to review the foundation on which the trade union administrative process rests. Fifty years ago under very different circumstances, U.S. union leaders made choices that shaped union strategy for the next half century. The Great Depression and World War II had provided the backdrop for rapid union growth. During the 1930s workers’ passivity gave way to militance and collective action as they flocked to the industrial unions of the renegade Congress of Industrial Organizations. Union expansion was aided by a friendly federal government, which first facilitated union organization with the Wagner Act of 1935 and then promoted collective bargaining during the war to assure industrial peace under the watchful eye of the War Labor Board. In the ten years from 1935 to 1945, union membership exploded from three million to over fourteen million, from 13.2 percent of the nonagricultural workforce to 35.5 per-

cent (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1975: 178). This rapid growth was matched by expanding budgets and administrative demands.

Reeling from the spread of unionization and retaining their hostility, employers sought ways to restrict unions and to stabilize relations in order to reclaim managerial authority in the workplace. A central part of this initiative was a political campaign that contributed to the election of a Republican Congress in 1946 and then culminated in the enactment of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947. The Taft-Hartley amendments to the Wagner Act placed strict limits on workers’ organizing rights, on strikes and other forms of direct action, and on unions’ mutual aid tactics, while enhancing the role of collective bargaining in part by buttressing the legal status of negotiated agreements.

The external environment helped shape and support the response of unions to hostile employers and the Taft-Hartley restrictions. After World War II, the U.S. entered a prolonged period of economic prosperity which was conducive to stability and bargaining power for unions willing to focus on the economic concerns of their members. Operating from a position of much greater strength than in the past, unions retained the job-consciousness that had dominated this country’s labor movement throughout most of its history. This focus not only made sense in a period of prosperity, it also melded with the stability objectives of employers. Long-term collective bargaining agreements that spelled out the details of the employment relationship became the norm. This rule-based system worked for employers in part because state-of-the-art production management relied on industrial engineering which could incorporate contract specifications into the scientific design of the workplace. Employers thereby affirmed their authority to make decisions regarding the organization of work, while unions retained the right to negotiate contractual limitations and protections for members.

The national union evolved into a service organization. The detailed rule-based nature of agreements combined with the increasingly legalistic grievance and arbitration system to enhance the importance of full-time union staff who developed expertise in these functions. This development reinforced a trend toward the emergence of a union bu-

reaucracy, a trend that had appeared in the new CIO unions in response to rapid growth and the attendant need for administrative control that expanded upon the traditional top-down hierarchy in AFL unions.

Although some observers raised questions about the elitism of national union officials and/or the metamorphosis of unions into business organizations, by and large the bureaucratic system was effective at delivering what the members wanted: steadily improving economic rewards and protection from arbitrary treatment on the job.

With the merger of the AFL and the CIO in 1955, the key pieces of the labor movement's administrative puzzle were in place. By 1955, unions were firmly committed to an approach that has come to be known as the "servicing model" (AFL-CIO, 1988: 6). The elected officials and field staff of national unions would focus on collective bargaining and contract enforcement. The AFL-CIO would coordinate political activity. The labor bureaucracy would concentrate on supporting these functions as efficiently as possible. Under the servicing model, active involvement of the members would not be necessary.

Missing from this framework was any clear conception of how organizing would fit. There were bold pronouncements of a commitment to organizing the unorganized, but these statements were not matched in practice. For twenty-five years after the merger, union membership continued to increase, but at a rate insufficient to keep up with the growth of the labor force. Furthermore, the character of organizing evolved to match the servicing model. Workers were recruited by demonstrating that their organized counterparts enjoyed better wages, benefits, and working conditions. Organizers talked of "selling the union," and unions developed "pitch books" that resembled the sales manuals of consumer product companies.

The Decline of Organized Labor

In 1945, union membership stood at over fourteen million, representing 35.5 percent of the nonagricultural labor force. By the 1955 merger, membership had grown to seventeen million, but the share of the labor

force had fallen slightly to 33 percent. The labor movement continued to expand at a slow pace, peaking at just over twenty-three million in the early 1970s and staying at that level through 1980. However, the unions' share of the workforce exhibited a slow decline over the same period, dropping below 30 percent in 1962 and standing at 22 percent in 1980 (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1975: 178; 1982: 409). This slip-page would have been greater except for the steady growth of public sector unionization during the 1960s and '70s.

The pace of decline in the unions' share accelerated after 1980 as unions suffered an absolute loss of nearly 25 percent of their members over the next five years. Although the losses slowed dramatically, the share of the workforce belonging to unions continued to slip. In 1995, union membership was 16.4 million, representing 14.9 percent of nonagricultural employees but only 10.4 percent of private sector workers (Bureau of National Affairs, 1996a). Today, unions have about as many members as in 1950, but represent a proportion of the private sector workforce that is lower than in 1930 before the great expansion associated with the CIO and the Wagner Act. A review of the more prominent explanations of the decline should put into perspective the extraordinary challenge faced by the labor movement.

The twin recessions of 1980 and 1981-82 triggered a shift in collective bargaining, ushering in a period of concessions by unions first to firms in economic trouble and then to other employers determined to take advantage of the situation in a reversal of traditional pattern bargaining. Once concessionary bargaining had taken hold, it proved difficult for unions to halt the trend, especially given economic pressures that persisted beyond the recessions of the early 1980s.

Perhaps the most important economic stimulus was the arrival of the global economy. International competition had been increasing for years, but the pace quickened in the 1980s as the share of imports increased in a broad range of markets. The process was aided by trade liberalization aggressively promoted by the Reagan and Bush administrations and culminating in the North American Free Trade

Agreement and General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade in 1994 under the tutelage of the "labor friendly" Clinton White House.

The external threat hastened shifts in the domestic economy as manufacturing firms abandoned old factories in the unionized "rust belt" for new facilities in the non-union "sun belt." The backdrop for these dramatic changes was a long-term trend in our economy away from production of goods to the production of services. With the transition to a service economy came a changing occupational mix, as the number of blue-collar manufacturing jobs dwindled while white-collar employment in the services expanded. This too was bad news for a union movement that had never established a firm base in the private service sector.

Even in many unionized industries where employment remained stable, there were sea changes that would upset the status quo and threaten unions. Deregulation, first of airlines and trucking, then of telecommunication, and more recently of the utilities, paved the way for the entry of non-union competitors, which took business away from established firms and reinforced pressures for concessionary bargaining.

Most troubling for unions was their success in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s at expanding the wage differential between their members and comparable unrepresented workers since it contributed to the cost advantage of non-union firms. This advantage enhanced the economic incentives for unionized companies to relocate to non-union areas and/or to seek concessions. Unionized workers were increasingly concentrated in old plants, firms, and industries that had a difficult time competing in the deregulated global economy.

Although some observers argue that economic forces themselves provide an adequate explanation for the decline of unions (Troy, 1986), a more widely accepted interpretation points to other factors as well. A review article by Chaison and Rose (1991) concludes that only 25 to 30 percent of the decline can be explained by economic change, and that

the most important additional factors are public policy and employer opposition to unions.

As already noted, the Taft-Hartley amendments granted employers more freedom to fight against unionization while restricting union tactics such as organizing strikes and secondary pressures. The full force of these changes was not felt immediately because unionization was at its peak and new organizing continued (although at a slower pace) simply as a result of momentum and union power. In the 1970s, with unions already on the decline in the private sector, employers' strategies of resistance to unions became more sophisticated. In addition, open violations of the law increased dramatically and by 1980 the practice of firing union supporters to halt organizing momentum was commonplace (Weiler, 1991).

The full anti-union potential of the Taft-Hartley amendments was realized after President Reagan broke with his predecessors and appointed to the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) management lawyers who were openly hostile to unionization. As the Reagan NLRB lent a sympathetic ear, employers were emboldened and acrimony during organizing drives reached new heights. Disregard for the law continued, but reinterpretation of the law was more important because it expanded the legally acceptable anti-union tactics available to employers. For example, while the prohibition against threatening to close a plant if the workers voted for a union was retained, employers were allowed to make predictions of plant closure based on economic conditions, to distribute articles reporting on the closing of unionized plants, and to show slides of their own plant padlocked during "captive audience meetings" held during working time for the express purpose of discouraging unionization (Hurd, 1994).

The Reagan NLRB's decisions contributed to the decline of unions in the bargaining arena as well. In essence, the employer's duty to bargain in good faith was reinterpreted to be a duty to meet for the purpose of bargaining. The prohibition on "surface bargaining" also was weakened as the definition of an acceptable "hard bargaining" alternative took shape. These changes allowed employers to avoid first contracts without committing unfair labor practices (Hurd, 1996). They also facilitated the

employers' union-elimination strategy of hard bargaining to force a strike and then hiring "permanent replacements" for striking workers. The Reagan NLRB does not get credit for establishing the "permanent replacement" option (which dates to a 1938 Supreme Court decision), but it did pave the way for the exploitation of this union-busting tactic.

The impact of the Reagan NLRB would have been modest had employers not been poised to take advantage of this opportunity to weaken unions. As Kochan, Katz, and McKersie remind us, the pragmatic adaptation to unions by employers during a period of relative union strength should not be confused with ideological acceptance of unions: "In choosing how to respond to both new business opportunities and/or the need to lower costs, the deep-seated preference of American employers for operating without a union dominated managerial choices, except where pre-existing high levels of unionization constrained this option" (Kochan et al., 1994: 12).

In the 1970s, some non-union firms experimented with new forms of work organization that emphasized flexibility, flatter structures, and greater decision-making opportunities for workers. These new forms of work organization, inspired by the concepts of Human Resource Management (HRM), resulted in increased productivity and improved worker satisfaction in comparison with the rule-based system, which still predominated in unionized facilities (Kochan et al., 1994: 107-8). However, by no means did all non-union employers adopt the new HRM model. Many were content to retain hierarchical structures and rigid control of production.

Two models of union avoidance also unfolded. The "union substitution" model relied on the progressive techniques of HRM to offer workers some modicum of voice and an arguably more desirable work environment than existed in many unionized facilities. The "union suppression" model relied on aggressive anti-unionism especially during organizing campaigns (Kaufman, 1993: 142). By 1980 unionized companies that wished to escape had begun to copy these two options developed by non-union firms.

The economic pressures that peaked in the 1980s provided the motive for unionized firms to change. Some chose to work with unions to

modify the production system, adapting HRM techniques to the unionized setting. Others sought to impose new production systems either unilaterally, or during the concessionary bargaining of the period. Many followed the "greenfield" strategy, gradually replacing old unionized facilities and their rule-based production with new non-union facilities organized along the lines of the HRM model. And a few firms joined their non-union counterparts to take advantage of the friendly NLRB and openly attacked unions to eliminate what they perceived as "the problem." The predominant pattern was for employers to tolerate unions where they were established, but to take whatever steps necessary to assure that existing non-union facilities and all new facilities operated without unions.

Some analysts have explicitly rejected employer anti-unionism as a leading cause of decline. Farber argues instead that the primary culprit is "a decrease in worker demand for traditional forms of union representation" (Farber, 1994: 2). Although there is undoubtedly some truth in this conclusion, it offers little insight regarding the sudden, dramatic drop in union membership in the 1980s. Public approval of unions did decline in the early 1970s from about two-thirds (where it stood from the late 1940s through the 1960s) to just under 60 percent. But there was no subsequent change of any magnitude, with approval at 58 percent in 1985 (Lipset, 1986: 301). Rather than a shift in attitudes toward unions per se, Farber's research may well be capturing the combined effects of economic forces, hostile public policy, and employer opposition. These influences combined to weaken labor's bargaining power and to increase the risk for individual workers brave enough to openly support unionization. The net impact naturally would be a decrease in demand for representation.

As they entered the 1980s, unions carried with them two hidden liabilities. First, the focus on collective bargaining and the grievance and arbitration system had produced rigid rule-based contracts, which created problems during an era when firms sought flexibility in

order to react more quickly to economic change. This situation was exacerbated as unions resisted proposals to move toward the HRM-based systems of work organization. This initial reluctance was understandable because the new methods had been developed in the non-union sector and because some unionized firms attempted to impose this approach unilaterally outside of collective bargaining. Nonetheless, the commitment of unions to the traditional framework merely increased the appeal of the non-union option for their reluctant partners in management.

A second liability for unions was the reliance on the servicing model and consequent neglect of the organizing function. Although inertia had assured natural membership growth early in the post-World War II period, by 1980 that momentum was gone, at least in the private sector. In 1970, unions added 0.5 percent of the private sector workforce to their ranks through NLRB elections. By 1980 this share had fallen to 0.25 percent and by 1985 to 0.1 percent (Freeman and Rebeck, 1989: 31). Thus, organizing activity in 1985 was less than one-half of the 1980 level and less than one-quarter of the 1970 level.

From the perspective of unions in the 1980s, the drop in organizing activity was rational. With heightened employer opposition and an unfriendly NLRB, spending money on organizing appeared to be a poor investment. The decline in membership strained budgets, and consistent with their strategic model, unions placed priority on preserving the quality of representational services. Furthermore, the obvious decline in union effectiveness during a period of concessionary bargaining created problems for organizers accustomed to "selling the union" by stressing the services it could offer. The low level of organizing further complicated the problems for unions, which needed new members to counteract the loss of unionized jobs in many industries.

The reliance on the servicing model also may have contributed to labor's problems in a more subtle way. Over time, this strategic approach deadened the activism and commitment of members. As

workers who participated in the excitement associated with the heyday of the CIO moved on and retired, they were replaced by others with no connection to organizing or to labor as a movement. They tended to view the union as a third party and to accept uncritically the expertise of the union representative in arbitrations and bargaining. The passivity of members that evolved should come as no surprise since under the servicing model the nerve of personal involvement had been severed long ago. You might conclude that by the 1980s the labor movement had lost its soul.

The Strategic Response to Crisis in the Kirkland Era

Responding to the crisis was not a simple matter. The natural tendency was to seek top-down solutions within the context of the servicing model, which had served the labor movement effectively for nearly four decades. Thus, when employer opposition to organizing increased, the unions reacted with a call for labor law reform. A proposal introduced with the support of the Carter administration in 1977 would have enhanced the potential for organizing success by increasing penalties for labor law violations, granting unions more access to workers, and speeding up the NLRB representation election process. In spite of majority support in both houses of Congress, the proposal failed in 1978 at the hands of a Republican filibuster in the Senate.

When labor leaders in the 1980s faced the triple threat of economic restructuring, the Reagan administration, and increasing employer hostility, they were stymied. As membership and revenues plummeted, national unions scrambled to keep their heads above water. In the early 1980s, serious consideration of any dramatic shift in strategy was out of the question for most unions as concern for institutional preservation prevailed. The difficulty in responding decisively can be traced in part to the symbiosis between the union bureaucracy and the internal political concerns of union leaders. Because union officers at all levels must stand for election periodically, a premium is placed on satisfying members. The servicing model had done that for years. Also, most elected leaders had risen to their positions based on expe-

rience gained within the context of this model. Similarly, the experts who staffed the union bureaucracy had gained their positions because of competence in functions related to servicing.

To complicate the situation, AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland was himself a career labor bureaucrat. Having never participated in organizing, led a strike, or even bargained a contract, and almost totally cut off from rank-and-file union members, he was especially ill equipped to craft a compelling alternative vision. Rather than considering serious change, the tendency for leaders and staff from Kirkland on down was to blame failures on external forces, to justify policies by past successes, and to avoid the difficult question of strategic transformation (Lawler, 1990: 48-49).

In spite of this ingrained institutional rigidity, the external threat was so great that most leaders of national unions began to search tentatively for a way out of their predicament. In 1982, informal discussions gave way to formal action. The AFL-CIO Executive Council formed the Committee on the Evolution of Work. Under the chairmanship of AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Tom Donahue, this committee provided a forum for union presidents to consider the challenges and choices they faced. The importance attached to the discussions is reflected by the participation of the presidents from eight of the nine largest affiliated unions. *The Changing Situation of Workers and Their Unions* (AFL-CIO, 1985b), the report issued by the committee in 1985, officially encouraged unions to experiment with new tactics and strategies.

Although labor may be faulted for a slow and/or incomplete response, in fact most national unions eventually altered or at least fine-tuned their strategies. Few unions made the choice merely to preserve the status quo. Consistent with the recommendations of *The Changing Situation*, a variety of courses were followed.

Improvements in Administrative Structure and Service Delivery

Faced with tight budgets, many national unions launched initiatives to improve administrative efficiency. The AFL-CIO's George Meany Center developed a program for trade union administrators, and indi-

vidual unions increased support for staff training. The search for administrative efficiency during a period of declining membership precipitated numerous mergers and affiliations. Unions began to engage in strategic planning, many for the first time.

In an effort to enhance labor's public image, the AFL-CIO introduced a marketing campaign with the theme "Union Yes." In addition, the AFL-CIO established the Union Privilege Benefits program, which offered direct benefits such as low-interest credit cards to members of affiliated unions. With the encouragement of the AFL-CIO, several unions established a new category of "associate members," who could take advantage of the benefits offered by Union Privilege and be non-voting members of the union even though they were not employed in a unionized workplace.

These administrative changes improved the effectiveness of unions in some ways, but none of them challenged the prevailing servicing model. In fact, the Union Privilege Benefits program could be viewed as a consummate version of the servicing model since members and associate members can take advantage of the benefits with no personal relation at all with a representative of the union. Even strategic planning, as practiced by most unions, was limited to more clearly defining objectives rather than challenging those objectives. Most of the administrative improvements were conceived and implemented at the top of the labor movement, with little involvement by or direct influence on the members.

Political Action

Ronald Reagan served as a convenient target because of his open hostility to unions. Since the AFL-CIO's leadership role is most clearly evident in the political arena, and most national unions are headquartered in Washington, D.C., it is not surprising that the quest for a political solution to labor's plight proved to be irresistible. The attraction was particularly strong because labor law reform had been so close in 1978.

Starting with the endorsement of Walter Mondale for president in 1984 *prior* to the Democratic primaries (a break with tradition), the AFL-CIO stayed the course with dogged determination. Coordination of campaign contributions to congressional races by the unions' political action committees became more sophisticated (Hurd and Sohl, 1992), and there were even a few notable successes on Capitol Hill like plant closing legislation. Finally, in 1992, labor's patient commitment to a political solution seemed to pay off with the election of Bill Clinton.

The new president promised to push for passage of the Workplace Fairness Act, which banned the practice of hiring permanent replacements for strikers. Furthermore, early in the new administration, Secretary of Labor Robert Reich met with the AFL-CIO Executive Council at its annual winter retreat in Bal Harbour, Florida, and promised to deal with labor's number one concern: labor law reform. Shortly thereafter, the Commission on the Future of Labor Management Relations was appointed, with John Dunlop serving as chairperson. It would be difficult to overstate the degree of hope inspired in Lane Kirkland, the leaders of national unions, and the AFL-CIO staff by the election of Bill Clinton and the subsequent appointment of the Dunlop Commission.

The labor movement's heightened reliance on political action may at first appear to signal a significant shift in strategy. However, the focus on lobbying, endorsements, and campaign contributions was well within the traditions of the AFL-CIO and consistent with the servicing model. The political solution, however, proved to be phantasmic. The Workplace Fairness Act suffered a familiar fate, killed by a Senate filibuster. Any chance for significant union-friendly labor law reform was wiped out by the collapse of the Democratic Congress in the 1994 elections, two months before the release of the Dunlop Commission's recommendations, which were a major disappointment. The Dunlop Commission called for modest improvements in the NLRB representation election process, but these were to be "balanced" by relaxation of restrictions on employer-dominated labor or-

ganizations ("company unions"). The proposals were well short of expectations, with no increase in penalties for violations of the law, no improvement in union access to workers to counter employers' captive audience meetings, and no substantive challenge to surface bargaining during first contract negotiations.

New Bargaining Strategies

After initial resistance to employer-designed schemes to reorganize work, unions adapted. They concluded that reorganization need not threaten the union as an institution so long as its role as bargaining agent was preserved. The change in attitude came from two directions. In some unions, locals began to accept management proposals in an effort to preserve jobs. The national unions eventually abdicated to reality as more and more locals gained experience with new structures of work. In other unions, national leaders saw an opportunity to enhance member satisfaction and job security by negotiating partnership clauses in national agreements to facilitate work reorganization. Finally, in 1994, the AFL-CIO Committee on the Evolution of Work confirmed the shift in labor's position with the release of a report, *The New American Workplace: A Labor Perspective* (AFL-CIO, 1994). Labor's acceptance of new forms of work organization was by no means universal, but the majority of labor leaders agreed to some form of joint decision making as desirable, or at least inevitable. The most successful relationships have evolved in those industries where employment is relatively stable and the union's bargaining position is secure.

The support for labor-management partnerships is parallel in many ways to the post-World War II experience with industrial engineering. Unions accommodated to management's view of state-of-the-art work organization and adopted new approaches to bargaining consistent with the new reality. The adaptation of unions to employer initiatives to reorganize work represents a break with the past to the extent that the rule-based agreements of old are replaced by more flexible documents. The transition was facilitated by the rapid spread of mutual gains bargaining, which preserved the bargaining role for unions. Thus, the servicing model persisted although the tone of the union's relationship

with the employer changed and the context of the union's role as bargaining representative was in the process of being redefined.

New Sources of Power

With the decline in the effectiveness of strikes, many unions focused their attention on developing alternative sources of power. The most widely accepted technique came to be known as the "corporate campaign." Corporate research identifies lenders, investors, customers, suppliers, stockholders, and directors who might be influenced to apply pressure on the employer. Some campaigns reach out to government regulatory agencies, elected officials, or potential community allies who might be able to assist. The idea aims to match the union's strength against the employer's weakness. Whatever the source, the external pressure on the employer increases the cost of continued resistance and thereby makes settlement more attractive.

Although innovative, corporate campaigns do not necessarily conflict with the servicing model. The campaigns can be conducted by the national union's staff, with a prominent role for those who are experts in research and public relations. There is little need to involve local leaders or members. In practice, most corporate campaigns have been implemented only after traditional bargaining has failed and a traditional strike has collapsed or has been rejected by an apprehensive rank and file.

Renewed Interest in Organizing

By the mid-1980s, a near consensus existed within the labor movement that greater attention to organizing was required. Much of the discussion and recommendations in *The Changing Situation* dealt directly with some aspect of organizing. However, during a period of tight budgets, it was not easy for unions to fund major new initiatives. The importance of organizing was heralded in conference resolutions, speeches, and union newspapers, but the rhetoric did not translate readily into action. Some unions did increase resources and reassign staff to organizing, but these initiatives foundered initially under the weight of outmoded techniques and an ineffective sales pitch.

Symbolic of the difficulties encountered, the campaign sponsored by the AFL-CIO Executive Council against Blue Cross and Blue Shield failed. The campaign had been introduced with great fanfare in August 1985 by Lane Kirkland: "The Blue Cross and Blue Shield campaign is a new organizing model which . . . implements many of the recommendations from *The Changing Situation*" (AFL-CIO, 1985a). However, months of bureaucratic delays took their toll. By the time agreement was reached on which state Blue Cross and Blue Shield plans would be assigned as a target for each of the eight participating unions, the company had implemented an effective anti-union program. Even without the delays, the campaign might have collapsed on its own since there was never any evidence that the employees desired union representation (Northrup, 1990).

In spite of these difficulties and disappointments, the commitment to organizing did not fade. Burned by the Blue Cross and Blue Shield experience, and urged on by member unions, which were encountering their own difficulties in the organizing arena, the AFL-CIO shifted its approach. In 1989 the Executive Council endorsed the creation of an independent entity, the Organizing Institute, "to enhance union organizing and to enhance the skills of union organizers." The Organizing Institute would report directly to Tom Donahue and would be funded largely by unions that chose to sponsor it and take advantage of the training it offered. Richard Bensinger, a creative and successful organizer with the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU), was hired as director.

Under Bensinger's leadership, the Organizing Institute was highly visible. By 1995, over one thousand organizers had participated in its innovative training program. The training promotes an approach to organizing that focuses on building the union around the concerns of workers rather than selling the services of the union to workers. In addition to training organizers, the institute aggressively pursued its charge "to advance union organizing." The organizing directors of the

fifteen sponsoring unions met regularly to discuss their experiences. The institute's Elected Leader Task Force brought together regional directors and presidents of large locals who had demonstrated commitment and success in the pursuit of aggressive organizing programs. Both of these forums promoted cross-cultivation and cooperation, which have been rare in a labor movement where individual national unions tend to be very protective of their internal affairs. In conjunction with the sponsoring unions, the Organizing Institute advanced the position that unions must be seen as vehicles for social and economic justice if they hope to survive.

Another advance that elevated the importance of organizing deserves attention. Fifteen construction unions joined with the AFL-CIO Building and Construction Trades Department in a massive nationwide effort to educate members in order to win their support for (and occasional involvement in) rank-and-file organizing. A program known as COMET (Construction Organizing Membership Education and Training), developed by the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers in conjunction with Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations (ILR), had reached over 100,000 union members by the end of 1994. The message of COMET is consistent with the traditions of job-conscious unionism: the rationale for organizing is to increase the market share of unionized construction and take wages out of competition. Nonetheless, the program challenges the servicing model because it seeks member support in order to create bottom-up pressure for organizing. With construction unions promoting an organizing vision, this initiative has the potential to "reinvent organizing unions" in this important industry (Grabelsky and Hurd, 1994).

Although the COMET program can stimulate rank-and-file support for organizing and the Organizing Institute can play the role of catalyst, real strategic change can occur only within the national unions. Most of the unions associated with these two initiatives demonstrated renewed

commitment to organizing in the early 1990s that clearly transcended rhetoric and superficial gestures. Although some unions with courageous organizing objectives still approached the challenge as if it were a marketing campaign, most rejected this conception in favor of a program to build the union by empowering workers to organize themselves. A dozen or more unions with aggressive grassroots programs led an effort to reestablish organizing as the central tenet of the labor movement and in the process struggled to break free from the constraints of the servicing model. Among all of the strategic responses to crisis during the Kirkland era, the shift in focus from servicing to organizing offered the greatest promise for the future of unions.

Contesting the Dinosaur Image

In his provocative book *Which Side Are You On?*, Thomas Geoghegan captured a popular image of unions with his depiction of "a dumb, stupid mastodon of a thing, crawling off to Bal Harbour to die" (Geoghegan, 1992: 37). In recent years, friends of labor like Geoghegan have raised penetrating questions about the current and future state of the labor movement. Nick Salvatore's description of labor's grim prospects hits the mark with the reflection that "the specter of widespread skepticism is the most frightening possibility" (Salvatore, 1992: 92).

Although there is ample basis for skepticism, the actions by labor in response to crisis during the Kirkland years, as described, belie the image of a decrepit beast lumbering off to its burial ground. Indeed, Bal Harbour was the site for the unveiling of *The Changing Situation* in 1985 and the release of *The New American Workplace* in 1994. It is important to recognize the depth and breadth of labor's vigilance as it struggled to weather the storm. To his credit, Tom Donahue led the search for new strategies and to his credit, Lane Kirkland encouraged the effort. Although concerns for institutional preservation may have inhibited creativity, the very fact that the AFL-CIO officially sanctioned the consideration of nontraditional alternatives was useful. This encouragement provided a rationale for experimentation and

risk-taking in national unions. However, the maneuvering and modest innovations neither solved labor's problems nor set the movement on course for inevitable renaissance.

With the persistent difficulties labor's image slowly diminished. Once reviled and respected for its political influence and economic power, by 1995 the labor movement was widely viewed as an anachronism. *Being Heard*, a 1994 report prepared for the AFL-CIO, used survey research and focus groups to assess public attitudes toward unions. In essence, the report's conclusion concurred with Geoghegan's observation, at least so far as labor's image is concerned: "Mostly unions are discussed as something no longer relevant, as symbolized in the frequently used shorthand 'They're dinosaurs'" (Greer et al., 1994: 12).

The Structural Fix Temptation

The labor movement's response languished in part because it was driven by concern for institutional preservation. Associate memberships, union credit cards, political action, labor-management partnerships, and corporate campaigns, though innovative and testaments to labor's adaptability, did not challenge the institutional inertia that inhibited radical transformation. Labor's response was modest by design. The objective was to adapt, not to transform. The AFL-CIO and affiliated national unions sought a pragmatic structural fix.

The primacy afforded to institutional preservation unintentionally contributed to labor's dinosaur image. *Being Heard* called attention to three related critiques. First, unions are viewed as "institutions, not people"; second, unions are seen as "bastions of special privilege"; and third, there is "a sense that unions are not truly accountable to their members." As the consultants explained, "When people think of unions they see impersonal and inward looking organizations, rather than America's working men and women. . . . Many Americans consider unions to be bureaucratic institutions, with an agenda driven primarily by organizational needs" (Greer et al., 1994: 11, 15, 16).

The objective of *Being Heard* was to help the AFL-CIO improve its "strategic communications" in order to improve this unflattering

image. The result was a new advertising campaign, unveiled in 1995, which delivered the following message: "We're the men and women of the AFL-CIO, and we're standing up for good jobs, wages, health and safety, and a real voice at work" (Labor Institute of Public Affairs, 1995: 5). In effect, the AFL-CIO under Lane Kirkland viewed the dinosaur image as a communications challenge.

An alternate interpretation of the survey results would conclude that special privilege, lack of accountability, and institutional rigidity are real problems, not simply a public relations dilemma. If this is the case, then the dinosaur image may be seen more accurately as a reflection of the inability of unions to adapt effectively to a new environment. Perhaps the servicing model and its supporting bureaucracy have not been able to accommodate to the extent of innovation required. According to this diagnosis, if unions hope to improve their image, they need to concentrate on changing their practice.

The Elusive Organizing Model

While the Evolution of Work Committee sought top-down answers to unions' problems, in some corners of the labor movement progressive leaders and staff members began to advocate change from the bottom up. The Industrial Union Department (IUD) promoted *The Inside Game* (AFL-CIO Industrial Union Department, 1986), which described how internal organizing could be integrated with corporate campaigns. The idea was to tap the abilities and collective potential of members by involving them in workplace rallies, work-to-rule, and other forms of concerted action. Because they facilitated workers' self-organization and provided space for members to make their own decisions and take credit for their own accomplishments, these "inside games" represented a break from the servicing model at least for the duration of the corporate campaign.

Subsequently, the Service Employees International Union in the *Contract Campaign Manual* (SEIU, 1988) and the Communications

Workers of America in its *Mobilizing for the '90s* (CWA, 1990) extended the IUD's idea. Both of these unions encouraged locals to conduct internal organizing in advance of contract negotiations regardless of whether an external corporate campaign was deemed appropriate. The message to locals was that by activating members and applying pressure on the employer in the workplace, the union could increase bargaining leverage. The implicit common thread in these initiatives was to apply internally a union building approach to mobilizing members that paralleled the Organizing Institute's external organizing philosophy.

The affinity between mobilization and external organizing was elucidated by proponents of an "organizing model of unionism." Appropriately, the concept was first described and contrasted to the servicing model during a 1988 teleconference on internal organizing sponsored by the AFL-CIO and inspired by *The Changing Situation* (AFL-CIO, 1988). Under the organizing model, the role of the union would be to help workers find collective solutions to their work-related concerns. Whether the local union was seeking recognition, negotiating a contract, or enforcing the contract, the organizing model suggested that the union's power would be enhanced by organization, activism, and militance by members in the workplace. The most ardent missionaries for the organizing model posited that mobilization of members ultimately would reduce their reliance on the union for servicing and representational functions and thereby free resources and staff for other pursuits (Banks and Metzgar, 1989).

Initial enthusiasm among adventuresome unionists for the organizing model ultimately has waned in the face of internal resistance. Officers and staff, comfortable with their traditional roles, have displayed a reluctance to reduce services compounded by a fear of the unknown. For the most part, members have accommodated to this attachment to the servicing model. Even those unionists who view organizing as the top priority have struggled with the relationship between servicing and organizing. Some have pointed out that organizing suc-

cess depends in part on the union's reputation in servicing; and yet the reality is that the only way to increase organizing on a significant scale is to shift resources away from servicing. Most important, mobilization has proven to be harder and more staff-intensive than traditional servicing. This has raised concerns about draining already limited resources away from organizing.

These barriers have led many unionists to conclude that the "organizing model" vs. "servicing model" debate is counterproductive. Upon reflection, the organizing model is not a fully developed construct that can be appropriately counterpoised to the entrenched servicing model. Although committed to organizing, unionists who criticize the servicing model have shifted their focus to building an "organizing culture," or promoting "transformation" to a new style of unionism not yet clearly defined (Fletcher and Hurd, 1998).

Organizing for the Future

Dissatisfaction with Lane Kirkland's risk-averse management of the AFL-CIO grew as it became clear that the Clinton administration was not likely to expedite labor's renewal. Impatient with the federation's inertia and public image, several national union presidents began to discuss the need for new leadership. In the aftermath of the November 1994 election defeat of the Democratic Congress and the concomitant death blow to labor's political agenda, the revolt went public.

When efforts to orchestrate a peaceful transfer of power failed, Kirkland's detractors announced that they would mount a challenge at the October 1995 AFL-CIO convention. John Sweeney, president of SEIU (the federation's fast-growing affiliate) headed a slate also including Rich Trumka, the militant president of the United Mine Workers, and Linda Chavez-Thompson of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees. Kirkland stepped aside in favor of Donahue, who was joined by Barbara Easterling of CWA on the incumbent ticket. In the first contested election for president of the AFL-CIO the debate centered on the role of the federation in organizing and the pace of change.

Donahue campaigned on his record as secretary-treasurer and chair of the Committee on the Evolution of Work, openly defending the deliberate nature of the modifications it had encouraged. Sweeney called for more aggressive leadership and radical change. Both candidates argued for dramatic increases in organizing expenditures and promised to greatly expand the work of the Organizing Institute. Sweeney proclaimed that it was time to “work the streets as well as the suites.” Donahue replied that “street fights . . . [are] a formula for disaster.” The contrast was symbolized by Sweeney’s defense of “blocking bridges” and Donahue’s call for “building bridges.”²

Although each union casts weighted votes based on membership, AFL-CIO elections are not exercises in grassroots democracy. National union presidents tightly control their delegates and therefore the election outcome. Sweeney was supported by enough union presidents to assure victory for his slate with 56 percent of the vote. The new officers assumed control on October 25, 1995.

A New Voice for American Workers

Sweeney, Trumka, and Chavez-Thompson ran as the “New Voice” team based on a platform that promised to “rebuild the American labor movement.” By the end of 1996 many of the specific proposals laid out during their campaign had been implemented and the AFL-CIO national office had been restructured accordingly.

The first priority was to establish for the federation a leadership role in organizing. A new Organizing Department was created with a \$10 million annual budget; Richard Bensinger was named director. The Organizing Institute’s program was expanded with the goal of recruiting and training one thousand new organizers within two years. Internships in organizing for one thousand college students and young workers were established for the 1996 Union Summer. The AFL-CIO MasterCard agreement was renegotiated with much of the additional revenues earmarked for organizing. A \$5 million organizing fund was established to assist innovative multi-union organizing campaigns.

The upshot of the primacy afforded to organizing is an effort to establish union growth as *the* priority for the labor movement.

Although new staff at the AFL-CIO have critiqued the servicing model, the federation is not in a position to change the practice of national and local unions. Rather, by attempting to establish organizing as the top priority the federation is in effect signaling its intention to lead unions away from their dogged attachment to servicing.

Although there is no particular commitment to the organizing model as an alternative mode of operation, the AFL-CIO has supplemented its organizing initiatives with programs that incorporate mobilization of union members. Labor’s highly visible political campaign for the 1996 congressional elections featured over \$20 million in issue-oriented advertising, but also sought to build permanent grassroots organizations of politically active union members. The renamed Department of Field Mobilization, while focused on rejuvenating Central Labor Councils, is committed simultaneously to member mobilization as the best hope for reviving union activism at the community level.

Ultimately, the New Voice blueprint calls for returning to unions the type of economic and political power they wielded in the first quarter century after World War II. Part of the plan to recapture economic power is a new Center for Strategic Campaigns. This center will seek to coordinate corporate campaign activities, to promote inter-union solidarity, and to train union staff in the strategic deployment of corporate campaign tactics.

Under John Sweeney it is clear that the AFL-CIO is contesting the dinosaur image with new vigor. On the surface the components of the new initiatives look a lot like the plan spelled out in *The Changing Situation* in 1985. But there are two notable differences: the AFL-CIO is taking a much more aggressive leadership role, and significant resources are being devoted to the effort. Whatever the end result, an immediate benefit of the flurry of activity has been increased visibility for unions. From a public relations perspective, Union Summer, the 1996 political campaign, and the willingness of Sweeney, Trumka, and Chavez-Thompson to crisscross the country to appear in support of

union causes have achieved a remarkable turnaround in the amount and tone of news coverage afforded to the labor movement. As yet unanswered is whether substantive results will match the anticipation.

The State of the Dinosaur, 1996

With unions representing only 10.4 percent of the private sector workforce, it is clear that to avoid being marginalized the labor movement must undertake radical transformation. The election of John Sweeney and the level of energy and excitement among new staff at the AFL-CIO are refreshing signs after years of cautious restraint. Unfortunately, these changes are insufficient to assure metamorphosis throughout the movement. Because of the decentralized structure of the federation, the key to success lies in the national unions and their locals. Although with its new aggressiveness the AFL-CIO may serve as a catalyst, lasting change ultimately depends on elected leaders and staff who are wedded to the old model. The servicing magnet is powerful, especially at the local level. Freeing resources for organizing and other initiatives is no easy task.

To understand the magnitude of the challenge, consider that unions need to organize about 300,000 new members per year in order merely to maintain the current density level (Labor Research Association, 1995). For the first half of 1996 unions won NLRB elections in units totaling 33,045 workers (Bureau of National Affairs, 1996b). Based on recent experience, this will translate into about 25,000 workers covered by union contracts, or one-sixth the amount needed to stay even.

Gaining the consensus needed to drive the organizing priority already is being complicated by disagreements over strategy. The new AFL-CIO organizing program is rooted in a tactical approach that relies on militant direct action and civil disobedience. As one organizing director explains, "There's a revolution to be had." Tapping anger

probably makes sense when organizing the targeted occupational groups identified by Bensinger as the priority: "immigrant janitors, low-wage healthcare workers, and low-wage service workers" (Labor Research Association, 1994). However, unions that organize professional, technical, and clerical workers are convinced that this type of appeal will not be sufficient in their campaigns, where lack of voice and a desire to influence management decisions provide additional motivation to unionize. While interested in independent representation, these white-collar workers often view continuous conflict as disruptive (Cohen and Hurd, 1998). It seems clear that different objective conditions will require different appeals; a narrow focus on one organizing scenario could serve to undermine consensus and restrict progress on the organizing front.

Underlying both this disagreement and the Sweeney-Donahue debate over blocking bridges versus building bridges is an unspoken philosophical contradiction. The new AFL-CIO organizing program implicitly aims to rejuvenate labor based on appeals to class consciousness. The detractors presume that efforts to rebuild must address career and employment issues; they implicitly accept the reality of a labor movement defined by job consciousness. Even if militant tactics and appeals to class concerns are viewed merely as tools to reinject fighting spirit into unions, the impact of a half century of practice under the servicing model must be confronted. Moving elected leaders and staff from comfortable routines into a more aggressive organizing mode is a significant challenge. Injecting life into the movement at the grass roots among a passive membership will be at least as difficult.

The most important contribution of John Sweeney and the AFL-CIO may be to project a vision that wins support from labor leaders and activists at all levels. In this regard what stands out is the decision to make union growth the objective by which all of the federation's activities are judged. Because union growth is an objective and not a model, it has broad appeal. It focuses attention on the organizing priority in a way that should make as much sense to those leaders who

merely want to regain market power as it does to those who yearn for a working class movement. The trick for Sweeney and national union leaders committed to his agenda will be to make a link between organizing for self-interest and organizing for social and economic justice. Taking wages out of competition is an important goal, but if the dinosaur image is to be slain labor must act as a champion of all working people and embrace a moral vision that includes economic and social justice.

Meanwhile, the key within the labor movement is to achieve major resource reallocation to support organizing. Gaining national and local leaders' acceptance of a new set of budgetary priorities will be easier if they can be convinced that there will be a payoff in the form of membership growth. As a step toward solidifying commitment, achieving some major victories clearly tied to the AFL-CIO organizing program is essential.

It is difficult to conceive of a rejuvenated, reoriented, growing movement if all change emanates from the top. The involvement, commitment, inspiration, and leadership of union members also must be cultivated. Members need to be mobilized and trained to assume responsibility for representational work in order to free resources for organizing. They also should be recruited to participate in organizing and political action. In order for a new level of activism to be attained, members will have to rethink their passive role and their relationship to their unions. This points to the timeliness of a comprehensive educational program that challenges members to reach a new level of understanding about politics and economics, and helps them work through why organizing must be a priority.

Although programs that confront these issues are being designed by the AFL-CIO Education Department, it is not clear whether the resources needed for the effort will be allocated by the federation and the national unions. At least one major union essentially shut down its education department in 1996 as it shifted resources into organizing. This seems to be a short-sighted decision; change at the top will be

meaningless if union members do not buy into the new priorities and display excitement. Political will at the grass roots is crucial given the need to reallocate resources at all levels.

As labor contests the dinosaur image it will find no easy answers. Hard work, careful assessment of options, and a willingness to take risks are all required. Ultimately unions must reorient and become organizations that capture the full commitment of members and the imagination of unrepresented workers. Without widespread experimentation and a significant reallocation of resources to organizing, extinction awaits.

Although a dramatic turnaround will be viewed as fantasy by many, the growing attention to organizing offers hope. Central to any resurgence will be the rekindling of enthusiasm for the conception of unions as a movement. The spirit and idealism implicit in such a notion and the hard work associated with it were captured by ACTWU President Jack Sheinkman on the occasion of the endowment of a chair at the ILR School in his name. Sheinkman reminisced about his career in the labor movement and closed with a refrain from an old union song: "Freedom doesn't come like a bird on the wing, doesn't come down like a summer rain. Freedom, freedom is a hard won thing. You've got to work for it! Fight for it! Day and night for it, and every generation's got to win it again" (Lampell, 1983: 28). ■

Notes

- 1 This section is based on personal notes of the author, who attended the conference.
- 2 This synopsis is based on the author's notes from the candidates' debate at the October 1995 AFL-CIO convention in New York City.

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