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### The Right Thing, The Smart Thing: A Call for Mass Action

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## The Right Thing, The Smart Thing: A Call for Mass Action

### Abstract

[Excerpt] I was an organizer for 14 years. I never met with an organizing committee or spoke at a mass meeting when I didn't remind workers of something we all understand intuitively: There is one way you get what you need and want in this world—power. There are only two ways to get it—lots of money or lots of people organized together. Working people have never gotten anything except when they were organized and moving.

The most important questions we in Atlanta deal with everyday are: How do we build power? How do we exercise power in a way that helps us build more power?

We believe mass action, in all its many forms, is the most effective way to exercise power. We believe mass action actually helps build more power.

American trade unionists operate in an environment that is full of constraints on our activity. Our private sector organizing is constrained by the NLRB. Our membership service is dictated by a contract. We often ask our attorneys to sign off on union activities. We double-check our "public approval ratings." We accept these constraints for a variety of reasons both good and bad.

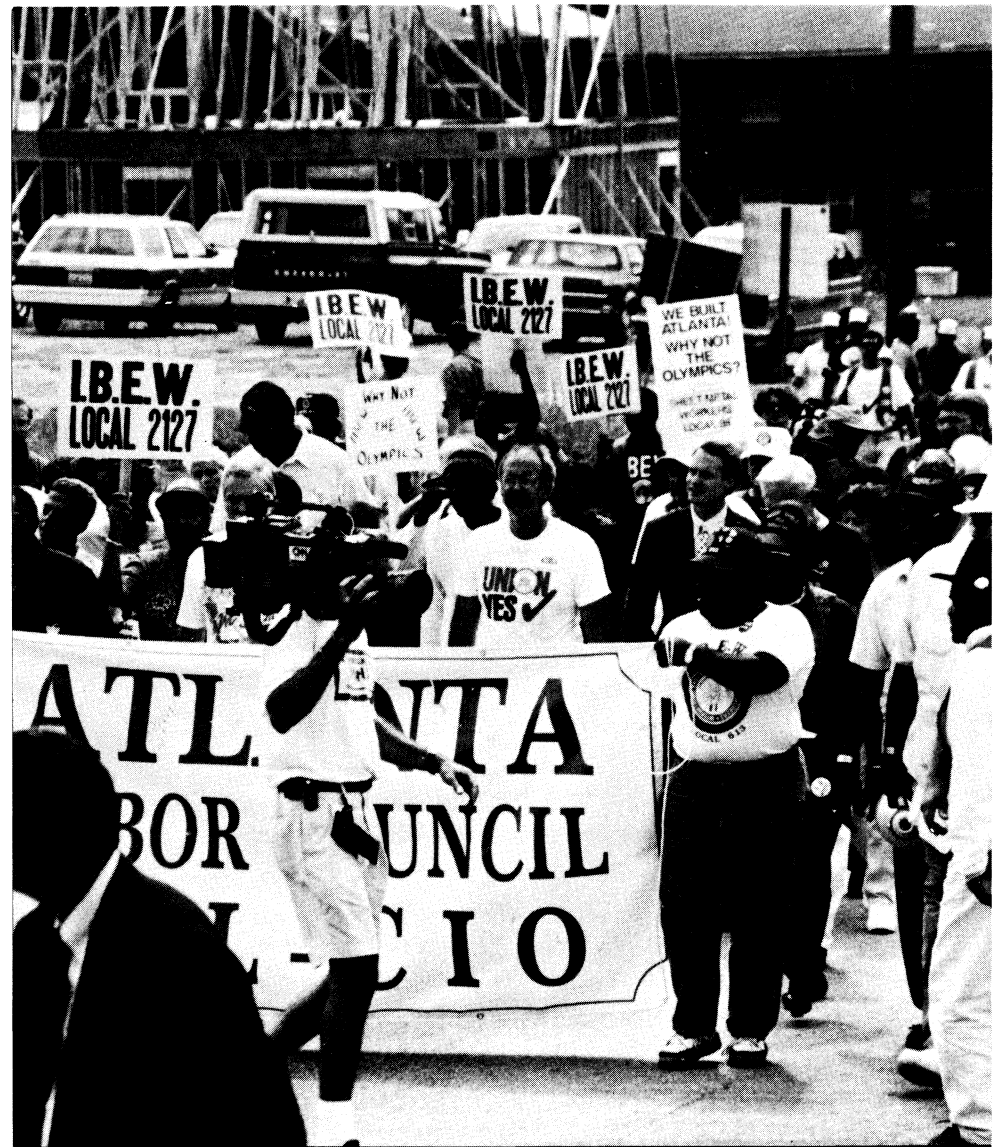
But where we accept these constraints absolutely, we limit our ability to build and exercise power and, therefore, our effectiveness as trade unions.

The only real tool we have is the strength of our membership. Any time the labor movement or any individual union in our country has grown or won substantial gains has been when members have been moving in mass action.

Mass action is the smart thing and the right thing to do.

### Keywords

labor movement, union organizing, worker rights, labor unions, Atlanta



**O**lympic Jobs with Justice: Ten thousand trade union, civil rights, and community activists took over the streets of downtown Atlanta to pressure the Olympic Committee into using union workers. The pressure never abated, and in July 1993, the Olympic committee agreed to requirements that virtually assured work by union contractors. The Jobs with Justice committee also pushed for guarantees that 10% of neighborhood residents would be hired as apprentices.

# The Right Thing, The Smart Thing

## A Call for Mass Action

■ *Stewart Acuff*

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■ *Stewart Acuff is President of the Atlanta, Georgia Labor Council. The Atlanta Jobs with Justice coalition is a committee of the Council.*

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Mass action is the smart thing and the right thing to do:

### **SOMETIMES MASS ACTION IS ALL WE HAVE.**

In 1985 the Georgia State Employees Union Local 1985 of the Service Employees International Union was born. I served as its first Executive Director. Public employees are not covered by the NLRB so we couldn't organize under the labor board. Georgia had no public employee bargaining law so we had no set way to demonstrate support or representation or to define power. Georgia did not allow dues check-off or representation or even meet-and-confer.

If SEIU had only been willing to move in an environment of legal sanctions and well-defined boundaries, GSEU would have never been born. Instead, we understood our struggle from the beginning as one of raw power with workers' willingness to move together our only real tool. So every year during the legislative session we did a State Employees Lobby Day and took over the Capitol. We did group grievances. We took over the offices of bureaucrats. We marched on workplaces—even state prisons.

Today GSEU has over 4,000 members in every area of the state. Still without collective bargaining or dues check-off or representation rights, the union exercises power at its most basic level and services its members by organizing them to move together on their own issues.

### **PEOPLE LOVE TO MOVE TOGETHER ON THEIR OWN ISSUES. COLLECTIVE ACTION IS EMPOWERING.**

The worst thing a trade union leader can do is to fail to use the strength and the will of membership anxious to pursue their interests collectively. Failure to move is disempowering, discouraging, and ultimately destructive.

After 2½ years of struggle in Atlanta to make sure the construction and staging of the 1996 Olympic Games is done union, we achieved a great victory. We engaged in two militant mass actions—with a third promised—before we reached an agreement on wages, working conditions, and benefits for the first and largest project.

On September 18, 1992, the day Atlanta received the Olympic Flag from Barcelona, 10,000 trade unionists and allies marched through downtown to the site of the celebration—completely overpowering it. We were led by Reverend Jesse Jackson and Dr. Joseph Lowery of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and we were joined by allies from civil rights organizations and community organizations. Although it was to have been a day of celebration in Atlanta, we turned it into a day of protest and anger. We moved in militant, mass action outside the accepted constraints of labor activity in Atlanta. We refused to join the mindless hoopla which surrounds the Olympics.

Then on December 22, 1992 some 100 trade unionists and allies from the civil rights and low income communities marched in and took over the office of the Olympic Committee. We held the office, forced a meeting with the Committee's leadership, and aired our issues in the local media. We were loud, disruptive, and angry. After the demonstration, one of the Olympic Committee's attorneys told me he realized the demonstration had "gotten out of hand." I corrected him saying, "It went exactly the way we wanted it to."



WILLIAM BERRY

Blending the best of the civil rights movement, the farmworkers' struggle, and direct action, Atlanta union members and allies hold a two-day march in support of GCIU members permanently replaced at a local printing plant. Demanding justice, hundreds of marchers journeyed from the gates of the plant to Senator Sam Nunn's office; Nunn has yet to sign on to SB 55. Reverends Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton also participated in the 15-mile march.

In both demonstrations, we went outside the accepted limits of our activity, and exercised the power of disruption and unpredictability. In both cases the participants were excited, enthusiastic, and ready for more. The participants felt the power they exercised. Instead of watching the Olympic Flag celebration on television and feeling left out or marginalized, our folks felt empowered.

One of the most important benefits a union brings to an individual member is personal empowerment. Empowerment doesn't just come with victory. It also comes from our refusal to be victimized, our refusal to accept exploitation.

**MASS ACTION PUTS A HUMAN FACE ON ISSUES.  
MASS ACTION DISPLAYS OUR RIGHTEOUS ANGER  
AND MAKES CONFLICT REAL.**

Mass action moves our struggle from meeting rooms and board rooms to the street, from their turf to our turf. And when we exercise power by "visiting" their place—be it a state prison or office or corporate headquarters—we make "their" turf *our* turf.

Issues by themselves are dry, unintelligible, and absolutely unconvincing. Real people moving on issues, real people taking action, real people marching make issues compelling.

Everyone knows that nonunion janitors in this country don't make enough money to live on. The public doesn't need documentation or white papers to understand that very basic fact. One of the reasons the SEIU Justice for Janitors campaign has been so successful in so many places is that the action of the janitors, the victims of economic injustice, has made a very common and basic fact a compelling human problem. When the janitors march a picket or take over a office, we see fellow humans struggling for the same sort of things we all want.

When Georgia State Employees Union members in state government and AFSCME members in Atlanta city government turned out in mass numbers in separate campaigns to beat back the privatization of their jobs, they showed the human cost of privatization. After AFSCME marched by the hundreds and attended council hearings, the city council could not debate privatization as a cost-benefit issue. After GSEU brought 600 members to the State Capitol and dozens more to committee meetings, the Georgia General Assembly could not consider privatization as just another budgeting option.

Probably no union has ever used mass action to humanize issues as effectively as the United Farm Workers. Cesar Chavez seemed to understand the commonality of human experience more clearly



Earle Mae Wallace "signs in" with an officer while ACTWU Southwest Regional Director Joan Suarez awaits her turn. Wallace, Suarez and supporters staged a sit-in at the Little Rock, Arkansas NLRB office in January 1993 to protest the unjust handling of Wallace's firing by a Fayetteville, Arkansas clothing manufacturer. This sit-in inaugurated the strategy of ACTWU and other Jobs with Justice member-unions to hold the NLRB responsible for its anti-union, anti-worker actions.

than the rest of us. And he used it over and over again. Middle class and professional people the country over would not have been moved to boycott grapes had the issue of union representation been an academic or business question. Chavez and UFW members made it a human question with their marches, their strikes and picket lines, and his sacrifice.

Mass action puts a human face on issues and makes use of the commonality of human experience.

### **MASS ACTION ALLOWS UNIONS TO STAKE OUT, CLAIM, AND HOLD MORAL HIGH GROUND.**

We understand that it is right and just for people to work and fight for themselves and a better way of life. Most would say it is our obligation to fight for our families and our children. There is no better way for a union to give its members that opportunity than through mass action.



The worst thing we as unions can do is allow ourselves to get caught in accounting-type arguments of wages as numbers or lay-offs as business decisions. Mass action focuses on the issue of justice in any given fight and allows us to claim and control the moral high ground.

### **MASS ACTION IS EFFECTIVE.**

The greatest periods of growth and prosperity for the American trade union movement have been when unions and their members have been moving in mass action. No strike is ever won at the bargaining table. Strikes are won on the picket line or in the streets. Three recent victories for the labor movement illustrate this point:

The United Mineworkers of America won their strike against Pittston with mass action: militancy and solidarity. Using the lessons of their own history and the history of the civil rights movement, the Mineworkers did sit-ins, held huge rallies, did mass picketing; blocked roads; took over a town; even invaded, took over and held a struck mill.

What moved Pittston to settle that strike was the unrelenting and seemingly endless thousands of UMWA members and allies who never quit coming.

Rich Trumka, Cecil Roberts, and other leaders were willing and happy to use all the imperatives of mass action to beat Pittston. Perhaps the story is apocryphal, but it is said that the officers and staff of the Mineworkers read Taylor Branch's history of the civil rights movement, *Parting the Waters* to prepare for the Pittston Strike. And they won a strike few in the labor movement thought was possible.

In 1990 Georgia fell into the national recession. Federal aid had already been cut. Tax revenues dried up. Mounting unemployment and social problems drained resources. Lame duck Governor Joe Frank Harris announced cutbacks in state services and lay-offs of state workers. Incoming Governor Zell Miller concurred.

GSEU responded with its most militant action ever. About 100 leaders and activists—all with proven commitment and familiar with actions—from all over Georgia loaded into one bus, pulled up in front of the office of state hospitals, piled out, climbed five flights of stairs, walked in the Commissioner's office, and took it over. Eight pre-selected activists from GSEU, ACTWU, Industrial Union Department, and Southern Christian Leadership Conference went into the Commissioner's inner office. While the Commissioner's staff called the police, GSEU called the press. For two hours GSEU held the office singing freedom songs and testifying about the effect of cutbacks and

lay-offs. They talked to the press and each other about conditions in state institutions including hospitals and prisons. They talked about their own families. They got angry, and they got loud. They completely disrupted business in the Commissioner's office. Dozens of state police arrived, surrounding the building, filling hallways, and emptying adjoining offices. Finally, after two hours the police moved in and arrested the eight activists in the Commissioner's inner office. The crowd departed as the eight were taken away in police vans.

The next day incoming Governor Zell Miller pledged there would be no lay-offs or cutbacks in state institutions.

In the summer of 1992, the Communication Workers of America negotiated a new agreement with AT&T. That agreement, however, was not won at the bargaining table but with rallies outside corporate offices and disruptive membership actions at workplaces. On the first day of bargaining, CWA held rallies at AT&T offices all over the country. Then the union hunkered down to unrelenting inside actions. Union members on signal would stop work or blow whistles or—my favorite—click pocket clackers. CWA members pressured AT&T management up and down the line for three months. Finally, after months of bargaining and keeping up the pressure, CWA and AT&T settled.

### **MASS ACTION ALLOWS US TO SEEK AND RECEIVE HELP FROM OUR ALLIES.**

The Trade Union Movement at our best speaks for all workers—organized and unorganized. It is natural and proper for us to ally ourselves with organizations and institutions which also represent average citizens. And it is our responsibility to be among the leadership of the larger progressive movement.

When we march, we should not march alone but with our allies at the front. And when our allies march, we should march with them. When we speak for all workers, when we fight for justice, when we march to empower our members and other average people, we will help lead the progressive coalition. And the other members of that same coalition will help us win our battles.

Mass action allows us to enlist help.

### **CONCLUSION: THE RIGHT THING TO DO IS USUALLY THE SMART THING TO DO.**

Mass action builds our organizations and institutions. Mass action empowers workers. Mass action allows us to claim and hold the

moral high ground. Mass action is effective.

Militant mass action is not new. It is not anything for trade unionists to shy away from. Militant mass action is at the core of our movement's history. It is part of the legacy of foremothers and forefathers like Mother Jones, John L. Lewis, the Reuthers, Cesar Chavez, Dr. King, A. Philip Randolph, and others. Militant mass action is union members working in concert on their own issues in their own way. Isn't that what we are supposed to do anyway?

The only way working people have ever gotten anything is through organization and movement. Mass action is not only at the core of our movement. It was at the core of the civil rights movement and the feminist and the community organizing movements. It has been used very effectively in the 80's and 90's by the environmental and the gay and lesbian rights movements. Mass action is how regular people win.

Of course, we all win when we are moving and moving together. ■



The CWA kept up constant pressure on Austin CableVision to recognize the union. Tactics included a massive Jobs with Justice rally and sit-in at the cable TV's headquarters, picketing the corporation president's home on the weekend, and taking over the lobby of a movie theatre which was showing a film produced by CableVision's parent company.